

Campus watch / **BACK2SCHOOL** / page 28

Our college bloggers + 8 jocks = No average day

An essential guide to signing day
STUDS • DUDS • SLEEPERS

Sporting News

SEE A DIFFERENT GAME

Olympic hockey preview

(Psst, Czech out our picks)

Splitsville
at Indiana

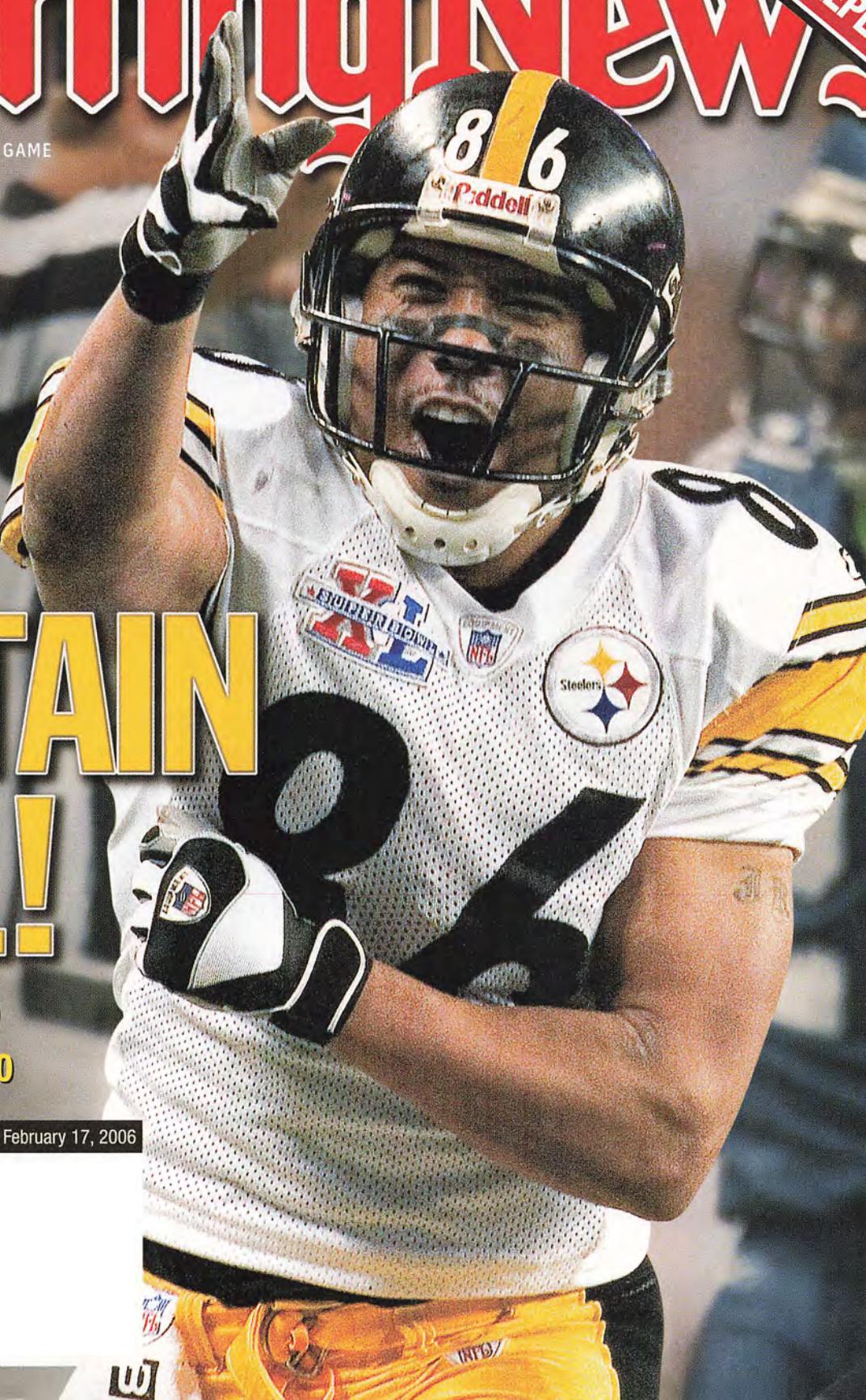
We crash *Maxim's*
Super Bowl party

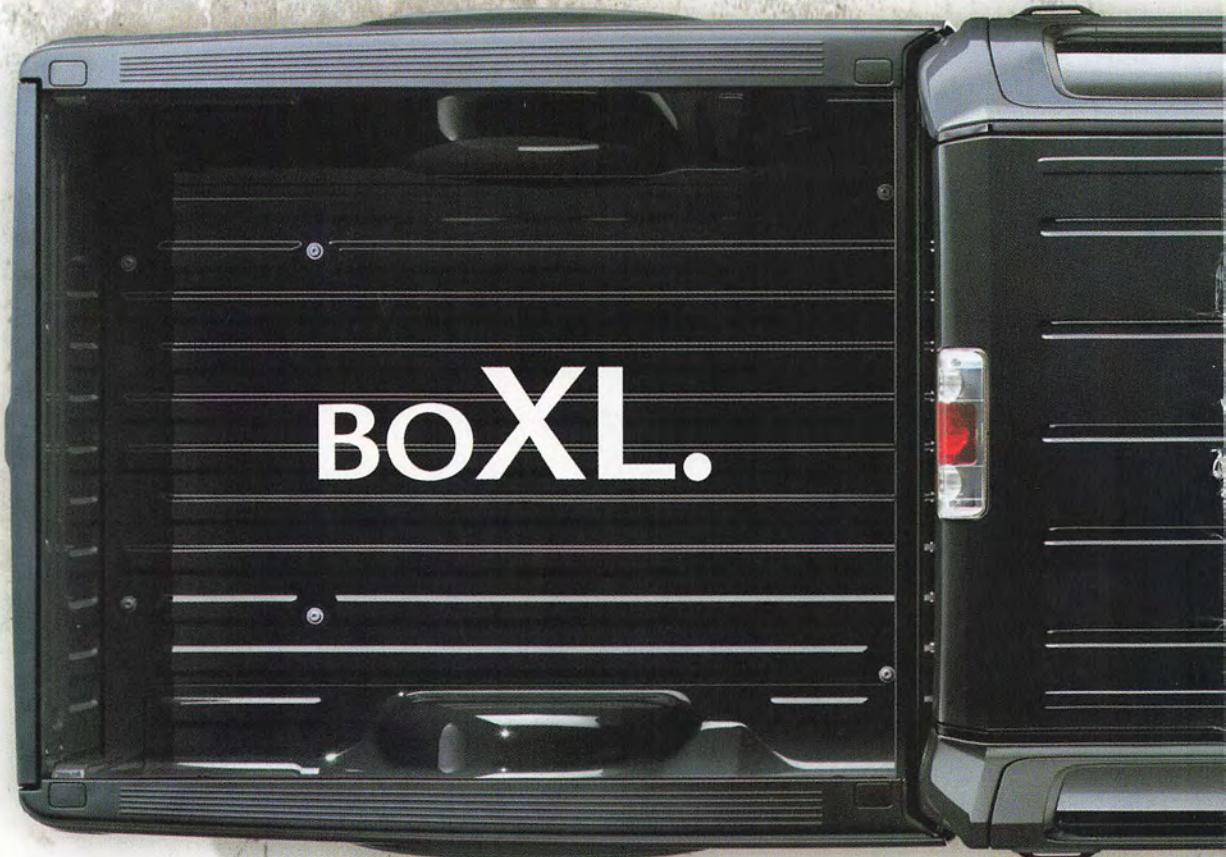
CURTAIN CALL!

SUPER BOWL 40
Steelers 21, Seahawks 10

www.sportingnews.com

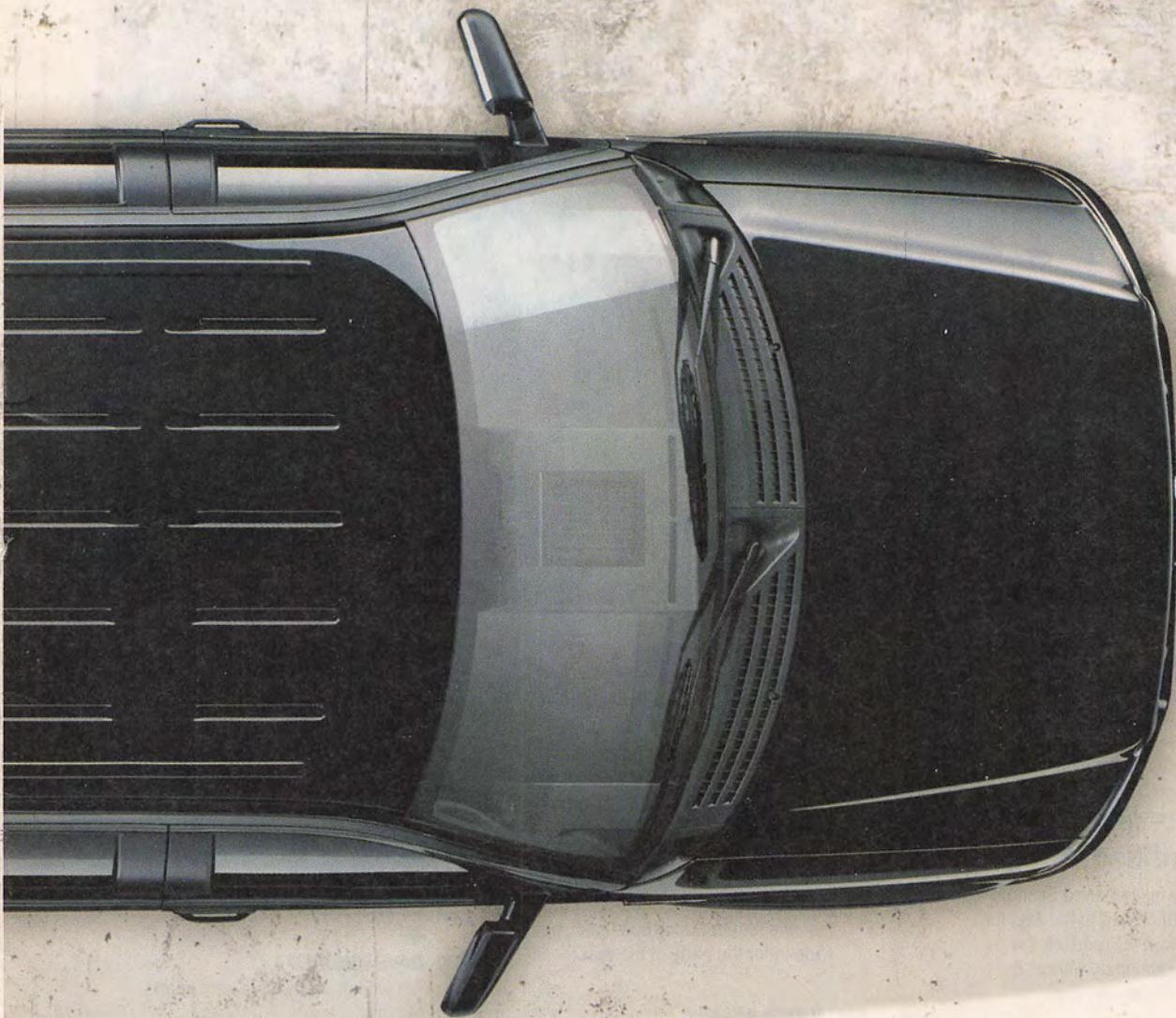
February 17, 2006





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12

Let it snow, angel. Bridget Hart, 6, got a chance to celebrate in a way Steelers fans haven't for a generation.

THIS WEEK

SportingNews
MAGAZINE

ROBERT SEALE / TSN

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Powered by a defense that conjures memories of their heyday, the Steelers finally get their thumb ring—and strike a blow for stability. *By Paul Attner*

20 Big shoes left unfilled



An early injury moved Seahawks safety Eric Pruitt to the field for Super Bowl 40—and left the Seattle secondary without its leader. *By Dan Pompei*

22 Basic instinct



The Steelers' knack for effectively mixing blitzes—including one of the simplest in the book—helped pave the way to victory. *By Dennis Dillon*

> **DAY IN THE LIFE**

28 The college life



So what's it *really* like to be Big Man—or Woman—on campus? Some of our college bloggers followed athletes from their schools for a day.

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- 4 **To Know List** A few NBA All-Star picks earned the honor. And some others, well, shame on the voters.
- 6 **On Deck** Check out what's ahead this week. Plus, **Bob Hille's Starting 5**.
- 8 **Your Turn** You talkin' to us? Join the readers who let us know what's on their minds.
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+	
60	DAVE KINDRED

The wheels on The Bus went 'round Motown.

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TO KNOW LIST

8 things to make you an INSTANT EXPERT this week

THE MAIN EVENT

1

Good news, folks! You didn't *totally* blow it

When it comes to NBA All-Star voting, the league uses a two-tiered system. On the first tier, fans screw up the vote for the starters. On the second tier, coaches screw up the vote for the reserves (results will be announced on Thursday). Mostly, anyway. This year, the league should be:

PROUD OF ...

Allen Iverson, 76ers. Yeah, he hogs the ball, but he's second in the league in scoring and is shooting his highest percentage in eight years. Hog away.

Tony Parker, Spurs. Parker busts into lanes like a New York cabbie, easily beating lumber-footed big men. His speed has gotten him so many easy layups that he ranks second in the NBA in field-goal percentage.

Paul Pierce, Celtics. He has wiped off the sourpuss look and is having his best season, scoring 25.6 points per game and sporting a career-high shooting percentage.

Pierce is better than ever—he'll be added to the East squad for sure.



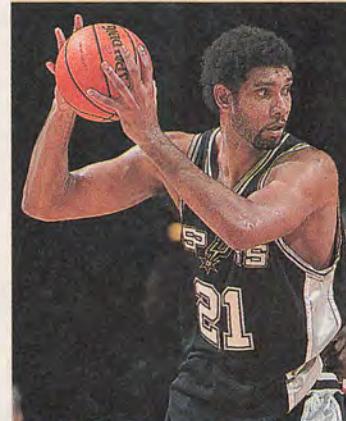
BOB LEVERONE / TSN

NOT SO PROUD OF ...

Tim Duncan, Spurs. He should not be a starter.

Elton Brand, Kevin Garnett and Dirk Nowitzki are shining; Duncan should be on the All-Star bench.

Shaquille O'Neal, Heat. Shaq is starting to roll, but missing 18 games should have kept him out of the



BOB LEVERONE / TSN

As for Duncan, well ... let's just say fans gave him a gift.

starting lineup and off the team. Ben Wallace deserves to be the starter.

Yao Ming, Rockets. He has missed even more time than Shaq. But they couldn't have an All-Star Game in Houston without the big guy. —Sean Devaney

2

Keep Friday night open

Get ready for the symbolism, the drama, the 2006 Olympics opening ceremony on Friday (8 p.m. ET, NBC). These

ceremonies are like watching four hours of ice dancing. (Oh, she

represents freedom. And he is oppression. Of course.)

The Parade of Nations always is fun. Let's hope the Americans get good hats. The Torino committee promises the most excitement during the Sparks of Passion, in which "eight ice hockey athletes will race at 50 kilometers an hour inside the Stadio Olimpico," according to Torino2006.com. Apparently, more than 6 feet of flames will streak behind them. Don't miss that.

When the pageantry is exhausted, the oath read and the cauldron lighted, let the games begin. —Kara Yorio

3

YOU HEARD IT HERE

3

'Why was Vince Young, the hottest player on the planet, putting himself at risk?'

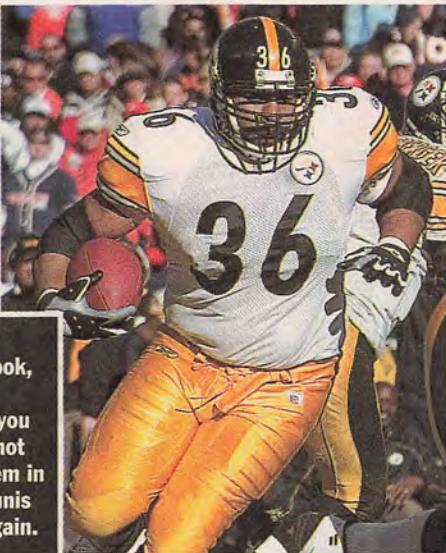
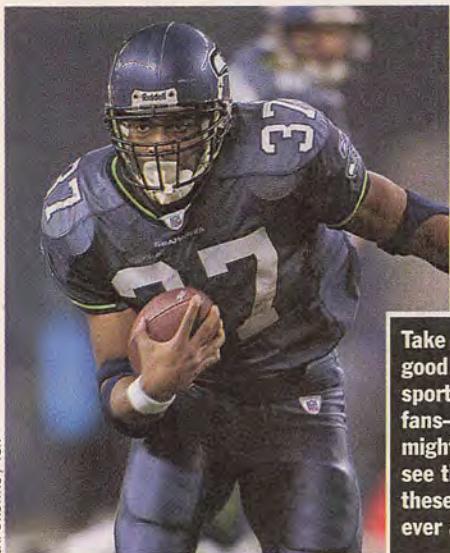
—College football Insider Matt Hayes (page 35)



LUIS M. ALVAREZ / AP

NEWS YOU CAN'T USE

Research of hospital records shows Bettis actually from Topeka >> NASCAR says 'every single person really geeked' for upcoming season >> Joey Porter



Take a good look, sports fans—you might not see them in these unis ever again.

4

IN THE SPOTLIGHT: SHAUN ALEXANDER AND JEROME BETTIS

It could be goodbye to both

Each of the teams that played in the Big Game has a big backfield question:

How great a price tag for Alexander? Quarterback Matt Hasselbeck and offensive tackle Walter Jones already have broken the bank with lucrative contracts. Now, after designating Shaun Alexander their franchise player to get a one-year deal done last season, the Seahawks will need to pay up huge—and long-term—to lock up the league's top free agent.

Will The Bus ride again? With Jerome Bettis thinking about putting his Hall of Fame career in park, the Steelers must be prepared to find a new closer—a power back to complement speedster Willie Parker. Considering how quickly the Steelers made a 1K rusher out of Parker, they ought to be able to find someone—either in a good veteran market that might include the Falcons' T.J. Duckett or in a deep running back draft class—to replace Bettis' short-yardage and goal-line prowess. —Vinnie Iyer

7

GET IT BEFORE IT'S HOT

We must protect this booty!

Every athlete is looking for extra protection these days, which explains the baseball players who look like something out of *Gladiator*. Well, thanks to McDavid Sports' HexPad series (mcdavidusa.com), athletes have yet another option. NBA star Dwyane Wade straps on a HexPad girdle—shouldn't you add some insurance in case you're knocked from the sky and land on your precious posterior? I tried out the body shirt during some pickup hoops, and for once I didn't have a collection of bruises on my ribs when I was done. Now I can set picks without worrying whether I'll be able to breathe the next day. —Shawn Reid



With padding like this, even a wimp can look tough.

STEVEN FREEMAN / WIREIMAGE.COM



Manhattanite set a national high school girls record with 113 points in a game last week

Somehow misfired on six of 60 FGs

Expert analysis: Yes!

Murry Bergtraum High is ranked No. 2 in the nation by *USA Today*

They're gonna love her at Rutgers

8

GO TIME

Epiphanny Prince vs. Kobe Bryant

Ms./Mr. Big Shot



Angelino popped the Raptors last month for a comparatively wussy 81

Clanked 18—didn't Smush Parker do that once?

Oh, please

Lakers are second best, too—in their own town

Next up

They're not gonna want to pass to him in the All-Star Game

5

QUICK CLICKS

Spectacular bids

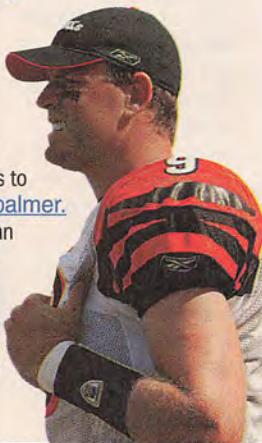
Sure, Clyde Drexler could ball with the best of them, but can he golf? For the right price, you can find out firsthand. Habitat for Humanity is conducting an online auction featuring several sports items, including a golf foursome with Drexler, a private soccer lesson with Mia Hamm and a game of H-O-R-S-E with Raymond Felton. Proceeds benefit Gulf Coast hurricane victims. A list of all the items up for bid will be available beginning February 13 at ebay.com/coldwellbanker.

6

Heeeeere's Carson

If you've ever wanted a peek into the life of an NFL quarterback, now's your chance. The Bengals' **Carson Palmer**

has joined the blogging ranks, sharing his experiences rehabbing from a knee injury. Visitors to the blog (carsonpalmer.typepad.com) can leave comments, which Palmer reads and even occasionally responds to in his posts.



KEVIN TANAKA FOR TSN

ON DECK

The week ahead in sports

THIS I GOTTA SEE

All times Eastern

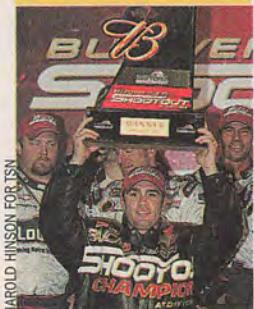
SAT 11

You could spend Day 1 of the Olympics all over the dial with moguls and Nordickers and biathlonites, or you could wait for *real* athletes (c'mon, it's a joke!) in the **Pro Bowl Skills Challenge** (6 p.m., ESPN).

Obstacle course—sweet. Battle of the bench press—huge. But here's an odd one: Jake Delhomme is in the passing accuracy competition. Hello! Did anybody see the NFC championship game?

■ Budweiser

Shootout (8:30 p.m., TNT). Not a points race, but it sure beats waitin' around for Daytona.

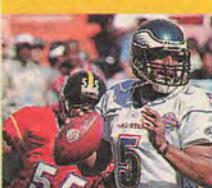


HAROLD HINSON FOR TSN

SUN 12

Pistons at Heat (3:30 p.m., ABC). It's statement time for Miami. If I may paraphrase: *We're No. 2!*

■ Does it get any better than the **Pro Bowl** (6 p.m., ESPN)? Not for a good six months, it doesn't.



HONEY ZEFERMAN/TNS
ISN ARCHIVES

WED 15

They say the Latvian hockey empire cannot be toppled. They laugh at us for daring to dream **Team USA** has a chance in its **Olympic hockey opener** (3 p.m., USA).

Well, I believe. You hear me? I be-lieve! Sorry, I finally watched *Miracle* the other day on cable.



RUDI BLAHN/AP

Yo, Rick DiPietro, you ready to get all Jim Craig on everybody?

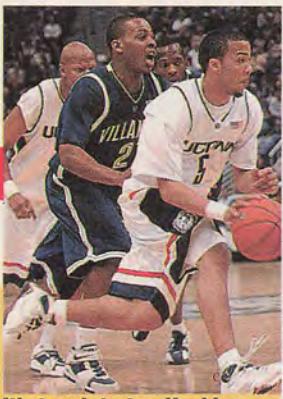


STEVE BOYLE FOR TSN

Read our story on speed and you'll be running a sub-4.4 in no time. Well, maybe that's a stretch.

MON 13

UConn at Villanova (7 p.m., ESPN). With apologies to all the West Virginia fans out there—especially you, Mrs. Pittsnog, ma'am—this is the game of the year in the baddest conference in the land.



BOB CHILD / AP

It's tough to top Huskies-Wildcats these days.

TUE 14

BYU 51, Notre Dame 50, March 19, 1981 (2 p.m., ESPN Classic). Before there was Bryce Drew, Tyus Edney or Christian Laettner, there was **Danny Ainge**—yes, young'un, *that* Danny Ainge—who went coast to coast for the buzzer beater that flattened one of the best Irish teams ever in the regional semis of the NCAA Tournament.



AP

THU 16

Real Sports (8 p.m., HBO). It's your final prime-time opportunity to get all psychological 'n' stuff by crawling inside the heads of Steve Sax and Mackey Sasser, who, all these years after they became morbidly psyched out, still might not be able to make throws your little sister could make. —Steve Greenberg



AP

Catching the ball wasn't Sasser's problem.

BOB HILLE'S STARTING

5

1 The Winter Olympics. At times they're force-feeding us new sports we're not interested in. Which brings me to my new sport: channel snowboarding.

2 The NFL offseason.

It's bad enough the season is over, but now I'm having nightmares. Last night, I dreamed my office phone rang and a voice said, "Mr. Rosenhaus and Mr. Owens are here to see you."

3 Winter workouts.

My college's football players have 6 a.m. conditioning, and they say workouts are more effective with the right music. Unfortunately, come fall, it's the same old iPod offense.

4 The NHL.

No games. Best players gone. Top-notch competition overseas. Does this all seem vaguely familiar?

5 NASCAR.

It has a new licensing deal with Harlequin Romance novels. Weird. Fabio seems more like an open-wheel kind of guy to me, if you know what I mean.

COMING AT YOU

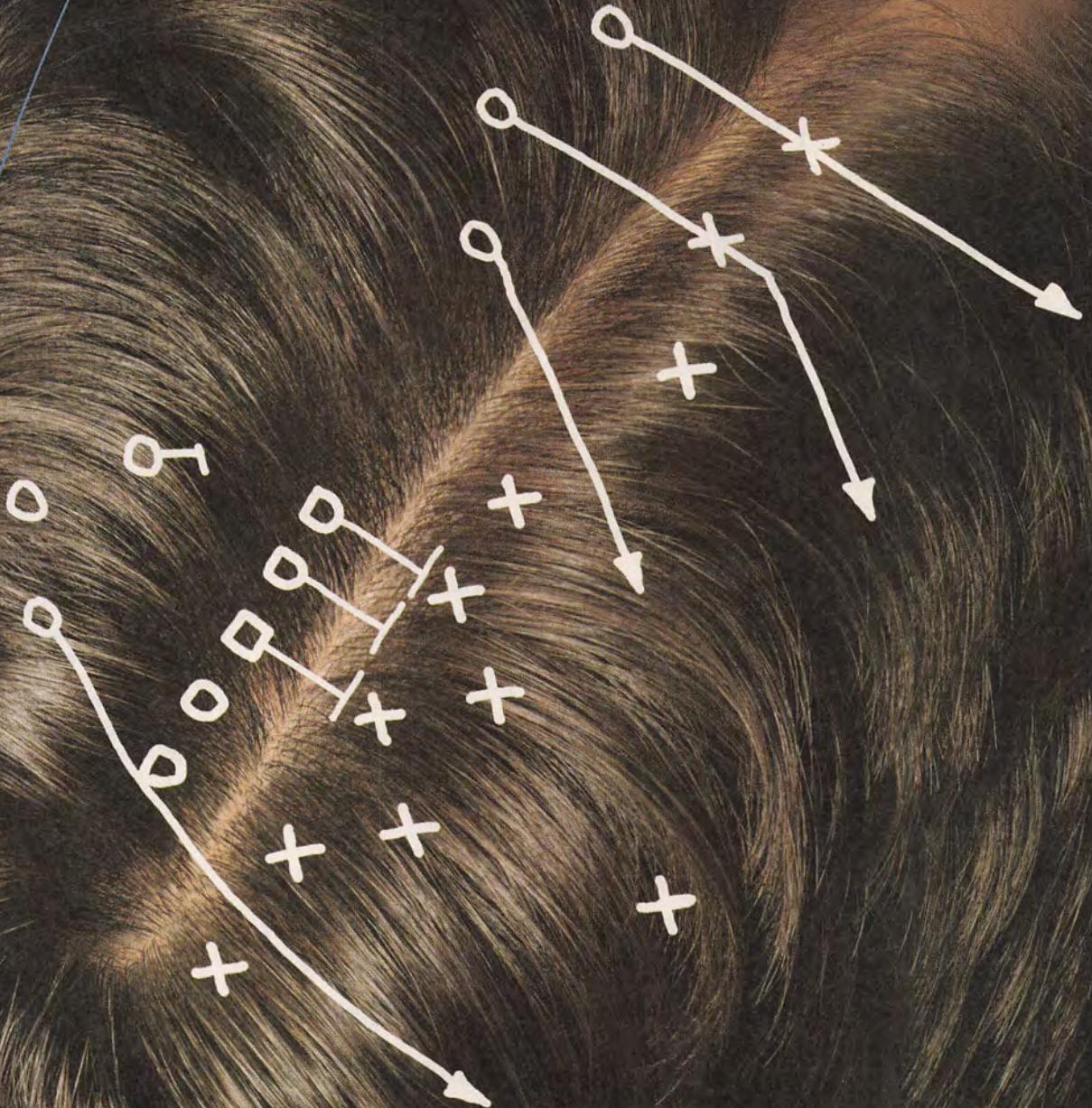
In the February 24 issue

Stars in alignment. So, which teams have had baseball's five-star offseasons? Which teams have fared the worst? Where do the champion White Sox fit in? Closing in on the start of spring training, we'll rate all the teams' performances since October and tell you who has the most to gain—and

lose—in the coming weeks.

■ With pro scouts polishing their stopwatches for the NFL Scouting Combine, draft prospects are working hard to shave their 40 times. We'll go inside one of the many Combine prep schools that have made a business out of the reality that tenths of a second can translate into millions of dollars.

■ Rev it up—it's time for our Nextel Cup and Daytona previews.



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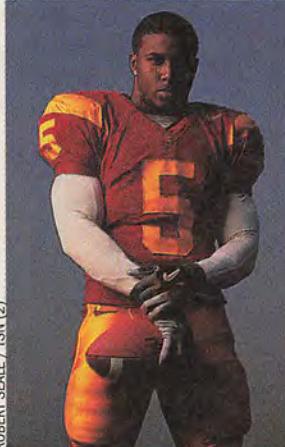
We put a lockable trunk in the bed of our truck. A deep, cavernous trunk—with room for three golf bags, a huge toolbox or an extra-large cooler. And the 300-pound-capacity tailgate swings not only down, but also to the side for easier trunk access. Making it a truck loaded with possibilities.

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You rant, we listen. Send e-mails to yourturn@sportingnews.com.



ROBERT SEALE / TSN (2)

If you want to win games, pick **Reggie Bush** in the NFL draft. If you want to win championships, pick **Vince Young**.

—yahdeeblah via SportingNews.com



him out of this game.

—nick_longaphy via SportingNews.com

■ Brett Favre, just cut the passive-aggressive crap and retire. Your place as a Packers god is in cement, and no one is going to think less of you for walking away from the game. —wrath6000 via SportingNews.com

■ Brett Favre, like Jerry Rice, has earned the right to do whatever he damn well pleases. He has been a class act for so long—exactly what a quarterback is supposed to be—that it would be wrong for anyone else to tell him that he's done. The fans and the media should not push

■ Steve Nash and Chauncey Billups are the top two MVP candidates (TSN, February 10). Kobe Bryant, for all his magnificent play, is only a few games over .500. If you don't make your teammates better, you're not much of an MVP. —Mr. Pick 'em via SportingNews.com

■ If Steve McNair returns next season, say goodbye to Billy Volek (TSN, February 3). The Titans will likely draft

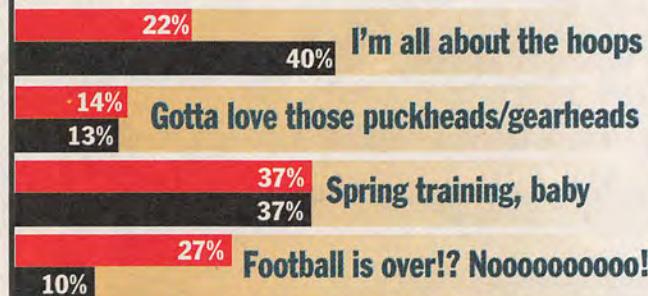
Matt Leinart or Vince Young. They should then let the draft pick sit out a year and learn from McNair. —Mark Kulbis, Cleveland

■ Dave Kindred's statement "the civilized folks and Master P" (TSN, January 27) in regard to the contestants on ABC's *Dancing with the Stars* is one of the reasons for the division of the races today. What makes Percy Miller uncivilized? Is it his enormous paychecks? Is it his massive appeal? Is it your ignorance of his culture? —T.W. Fludd, Harrisburg, N.C.

POLLING PLACE

What's your state of mind now that football season is over?

● SportingNews.com users ● Sporting News staff



RADIO STAR

Real talk from a fan on Sporting News Radio

'Recruiting in college football is the backbone to a team's future, and more people need to get involved with it—especially the national media, since they are the ones coming out with the preseason rankings.' —Pete in Greenville, S.C., on the Rick Ballou Show

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THE NEW RIDGELINE  **HONDA**



MY TURN

tgarner@sportingnews.com



Tricia Garner

Young and Restless

A shoe-in for party of the year

Everybody is somebody at the *Maxim* Super Bowl bash

It's Super Bowl weekend, the biggest party weekend of the year. I'm getting ready for the one that's being hyped as not just a party but an "experience"—the *Maxim* bash. More than 10,000 people have requested invitations; only about 1,800 will be allowed in.

I've primped myself into A-list shape and I'm ready to walk out the door—and I realize I only have one shoe. Specifically, my left shoe. I packed three other pairs of black shoes, but none of them goes with this particular dress. So I do what any other *Maxim* partygoer would do in a pinch—I hit the local Meijer at 10 p.m. and buy a replacement pair for \$19.99. A bumpy start to the night, but I'm sure Jessica Alba is *totally* doing the same thing right now.

I arrive downtown in my hot new shoes and go to the first checkpoint, a parking garage about a block from the party. A guy standing outside warns me that many people are being turned away: "My friends got in, and I didn't."

I look at him. "They just *left* you?"

He shrugs. "It's the *Maxim* party."

I head down the street and join the line leading into the party. The line is not moving. At all. Did I mention that it's snowing? Some of us are going with it ("It doesn't matter if you're black or white because right now, we're all blue!" bellows one equal opportunist); others, not so much. A fight almost breaks out, and the guy behind me tries to shove his way to the front of the line. "I've got a wristband!" he yells. "We all have wristbands," someone counters. Wristband Guy continues: "But I'm



AMY E. POWERS / AP

I'm buying bargain-bin heels two hours before the party—but I'm sure Jessica Alba is *totally* doing the same thing right now.

a major league baseball player!"

Sure enough, it's Michael Young—or at least someone who looks exactly like him. Unfortunately, even pro baseball players who hit .331 last season don't get special treatment in line. Finally, just before midnight, we both get in.

There are three main areas on this level. One is set up like a club—it's dark and boasts platforms with dancing girls and loud music. Another section looks like a bar, the difference being the trapeze artist hanging from the ceiling. The third area—the "*Maxim*

Rock City Casino"—is the coolest. Wyclef Jean performs onstage, and there are craps tables scattered throughout. Pinball machines line the back wall.

I'm walking from the club room to the bar room when I hear, "Hey, that's Mike Tyson!" I look to the right, and there he is, decked out in a hat and jacket, genially shaking the hands of all who approach him. Fortunately, there are no children here for him to eat.

Given that this is a Super Bowl party, it's funny to see who gets the biggest response. A pack of NFL players moves through the crowd, and two girls don't bat an eye. Instead, they squeal, "Oh, my gosh, it's Joey Fatone! I can't believe I'm standing in the same room as Joey Fatone!" The former *NSync'er is standing so close to me, we're touching. I totally want to tell him to quit playing games with my heart, but then I realize that's the wrong boy band.

In the club room, two girls are dancing and putting on a show for anyone who even remotely resembles an athlete. I approach them and ask, "Do you know who those guys are?" "No," one responds, and her implication is,

Does it matter?

That seems to be the theme—everyone here *could* be someone, even if you don't know exactly who. A guy even mistakes me—the girl with the \$19.99 shoes!—for someone important. And out in the lobby, a few girls huddle up and try to figure out who the guy is wearing a gold suit, glad-handing passersby.

Then the answer: "Oh, I know! It's the brother from *Family Matters*!"

See? Everyone's someone at the *Maxim* party.



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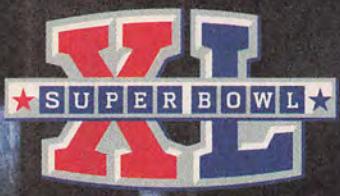
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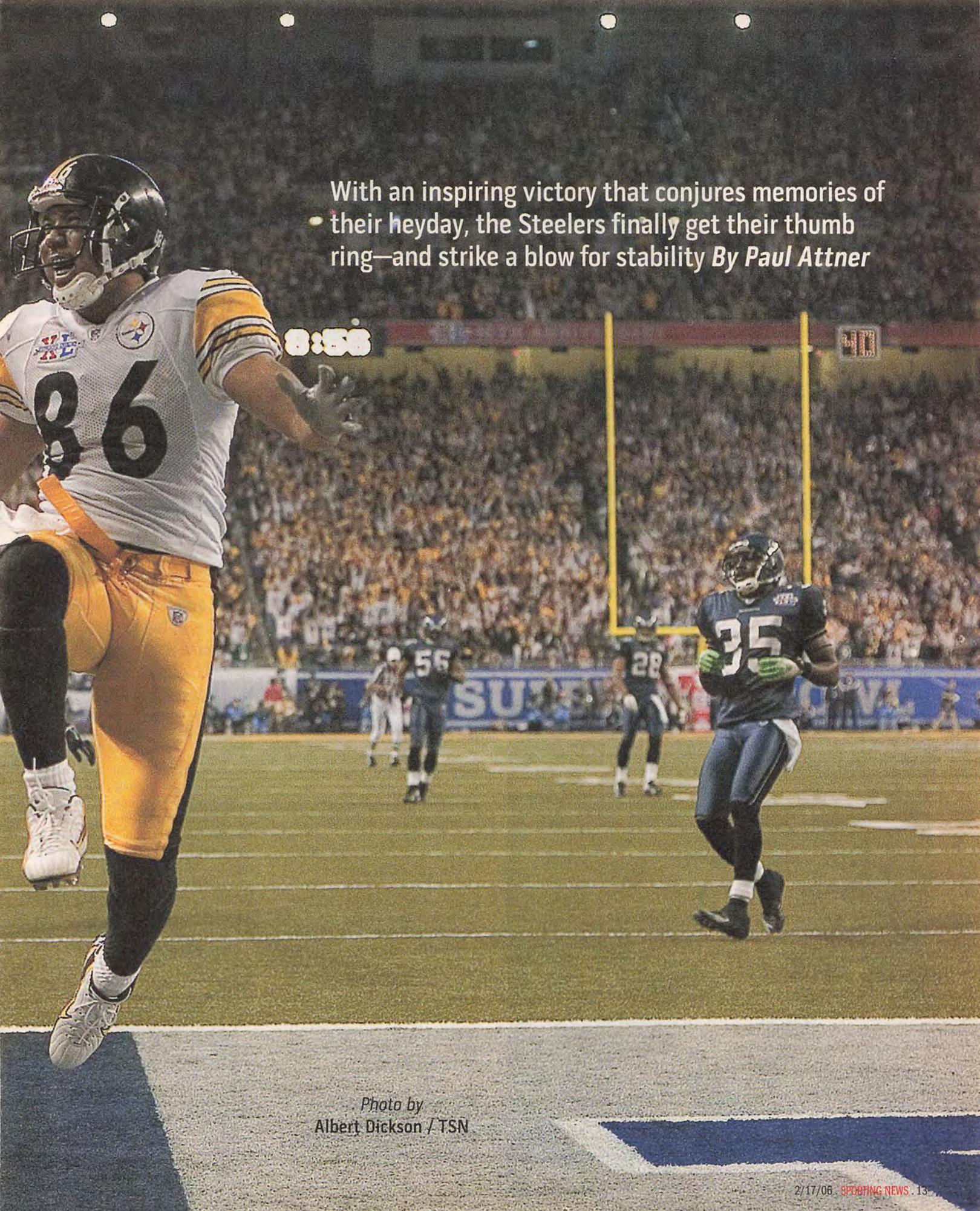


NFL

That '70s Show



Ward found his piece of pure heaven after catching a touchdown pass from Randle El off a reverse—a play that all but deep-sixed the Seahawks' comeback hopes.



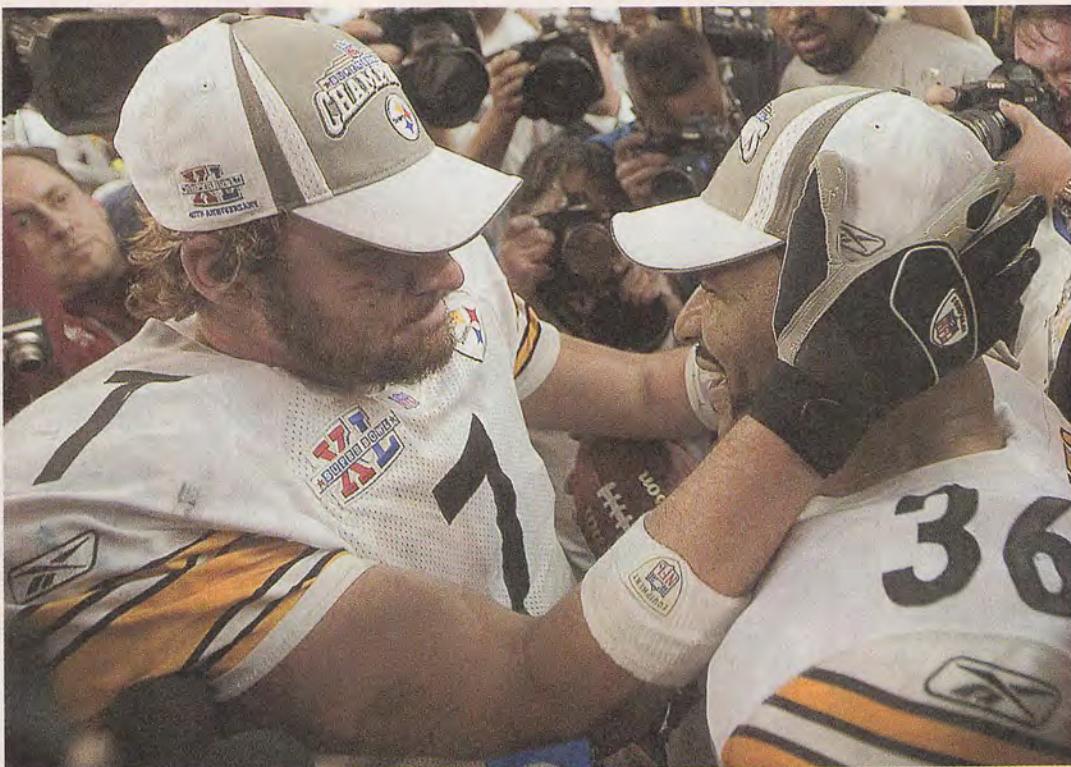
With an inspiring victory that conjures memories of their heyday, the Steelers finally get their thumb ring—and strike a blow for stability *By Paul Attner*

Photo by
Albert Dickson / TSN

This is about tears. Tears from the coach. Tears from the star running back. And maybe, if you look close enough, a tear from the team owner. This is what can make some victories so special; they aren't about the quality of how they are achieved, but rather about the joy resulting from the triumph. And when the final seconds of Super Bowl 40 tick off, the pure, wonderful emotion of it all overwhelms these three men who mean so much to what is the Pittsburgh Steelers.

For Bill Cowher, they are tears of relief, 14 years coming, tears that validate a career that lasted this long in one city only because he is blessed with the most patient of NFL owners.

For Jerome Bettis, they are tears of a dream, to come to his home city of Detroit and end a career holding the Lombardi Trophy in his arms, kissing it, knowing he had returned for one final season hoping to accomplish all of this. And to do it, oh my, the joy.



ALBERT DICKSON / TSN

Roethlisberger and Bettis weren't at their best in the Super Bowl, but ultimately, it didn't matter.

For Dan Rooney, they are tears of accomplishment, a fifth ring, rewarding a city of fans so faithful they somehow corralled enough tickets to dominate the noise inside Ford Field. "Ninety percent Steeler fans," Seahawks quarterback Matt Hasselbeck

says in disgust.

These tears come after the most improbable of journeys, one that starts nine weeks ago, the Steelers standing at 7-5, wondering whether the playoffs already are out of touch—a journey that begins when their coach pulls out the corniest of phrases, telling his players to "wipe the slate clean" and start this season again. They listen, and they do just that, amassing a winning streak that reaches eight and includes four wins in a row away from home and triumphs over Indianapolis and Denver—the AFC's top two seeds—and the Seahawks, the NFC's No. 1 seed.

These tears also are tears for history, the first sixth seed to win a Super Bowl, the third franchise to win five rings, joining the Cowboys and 49ers. This is the least artistic of the eight victories, a rough, uneven, scrambling kind of game in which both teams never are in sync or firm control. Pittsburgh really doesn't do much—a handful of huge plays clustered around misfires and six punts. But Seattle

S)) HEAR, HEAR

'You know it's time to put The Bus in the garage. You know it's been an incredible career. It's time to call it quits.'

—Steelers running back Jerome Bettis with James Brown on Sporting News Radio

uncharacteristically implodes, the league's No. 1 scoring offense stalled by awful penalties, two missed field-goal attempts and one killer interception. Still, those are the criticisms of purists; for the Steelers it is a 21-10 masterpiece of pure heaven, confirmation of why they, the lowest seed, could be favorites before kickoff.

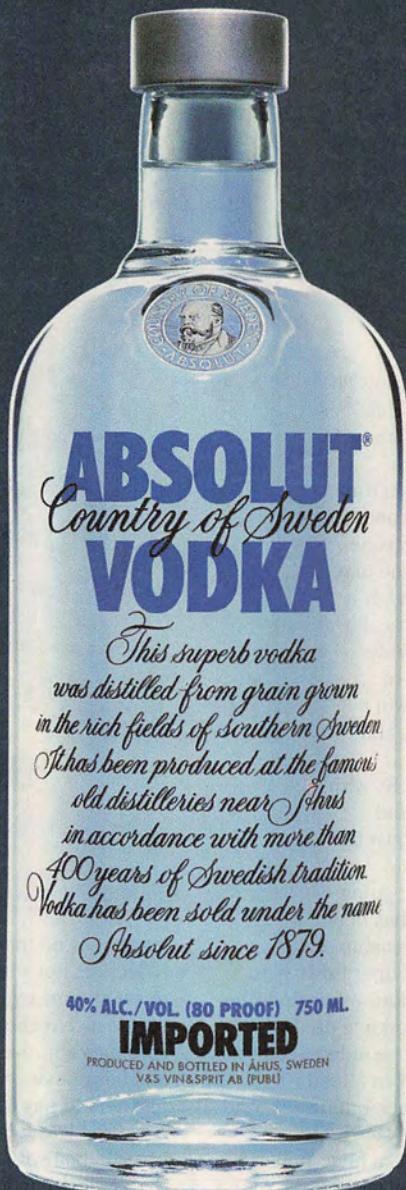
"You can't ever replace how you feel at this moment," says wide receiver Hines Ward, the game's MVP for his 123 receiving yards and one touchdown. "You win these games for so many people—for Mr. Rooney, for Bill Cowher, for Jerome. I am so happy for them. They deserve this so much. We've heard so much about the Steelers of the '70s. For us to be able to stand with them, we had to win this game."



ALBERT DICKSON / TSN

After lighting up the Seahawks for 123 yards and a touchdown, Super Bowl MVP Ward lit up the stage with son Jadon.

THE





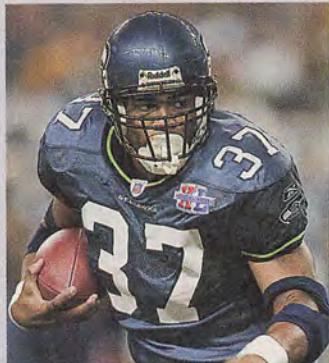
A hangover cure

The past five NFL runners-up have failed to make the playoffs the following season, but expect the Seahawks to break that jinx.

They will need big bucks to re-sign free agent **Shaun Alexander**, but they should get that settled and have no trouble taking care of the still-weak NFC West in '06. Matt Hasselbeck is hitting his prime, which means Seattle will continue to have the most balanced and explosive offense in the conference.

Defensively, Lofa Tatupu and Leroy Hill will only get better in their second seasons and give the team even more complete play at linebacker. The Seahawks have the fewest concerns among likely NFC contenders and figure to be the favorites to repeat as champions.

A big reason for the most recent Super Bowl losers' falling flat has been injuries, so keeping a clean bill of health is most important. —Vinnie Iyer



BOB LEVERONE / TSN

LOSER FOLLOWING SEASON



Eagles 6-10



Panthers 7-9



Raiders 4-12



Rams 7-9



Giants 7-9

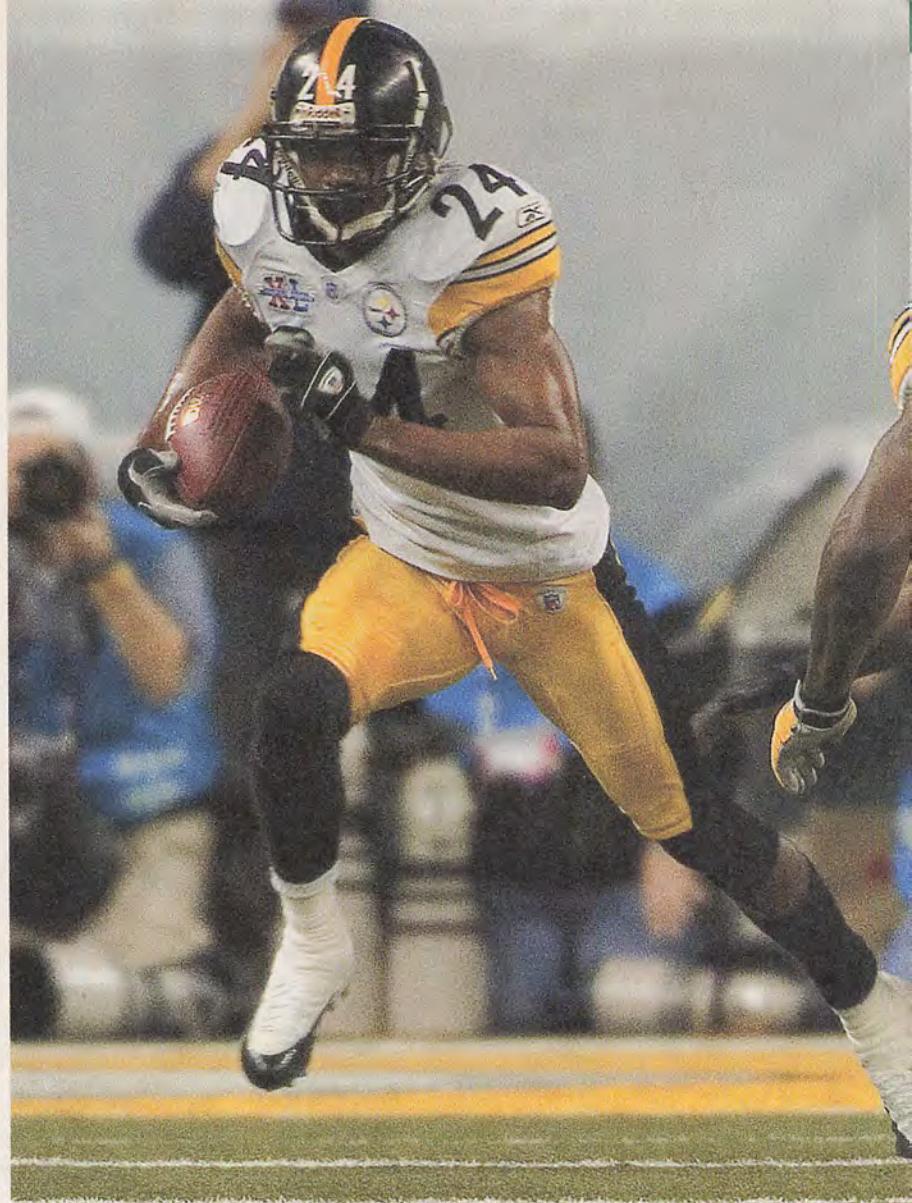
In the days leading up to the game, Detroit becomes a Steeler town, a brawny, chilly and, finally, snowy place. After all, this is Bettis' city, and he soaks up every second. He even has some teammates over to his mom's house for a home-cooked dinner, and he stages his own fundraiser one night, a celebrity bowling tournament.

"This is amazing," he says. "To have this opportunity at home in Detroit, to win a championship in front of your friends and family and everyone who has seen me play since I was a kid, is a dream come true. It's been an incredible ride. I decided to come back to win a championship, and my mission is accomplished. So with that, I have to bid farewell." And just like that, he retires.

Cowher isn't going anywhere. He has been to this championship once before, losing Super Bowl 30 to the Cowboys; four other times he fell in the conference title game. He likes to say he didn't need this ring to confirm an already wonderful career, but he lies. And it shows on his face on the awards podium, a huge smile erasing the frustrations, overwhelming the granite jaw.

"I am not in this for my validation," he says. "I can't control that. I'm just happy for the players and the coaches and for Mr. Rooney. I'm happy for the support, and you talk about a class guy. He's inspired me."

You might have thought the NFL itself would be inspired by Super Bowl 40, given the significance of four decades of this once-modest, now-extraordinary occasion. But the



league has no time for lengthy reflection, not when it continues to set all-time regular-season attendance records and has revenues approaching \$5.8 billion and has convinced its television partners to pay \$24 billion for a new broadcast package and can boast, albeit with shaky evidence, that up to 1 billion folks watched at least a bit of Sunday's championship.

We are talking a lot of billions of dollars here, and there is power and influence and a swagger attached to these almost unfathomable numbers that infuse the NFL with a role in our lives far exceeding anything we could have anticipated when Green Bay and Kansas City kicked off the first Super Bowl, which, we all know, was viewed as so ho-hum it wasn't even called *super* back in 1967.

Now, the Super Bowl is no longer anything close to just a

Ike Taylor's fourth quarter thievery paved the way for the Steelers' final touchdown.

game. This could have been Hollywood or Vegas, not Detroit—well, unless you looked outside, of course—what with the stars who deem it important enough to be seen in Motown. Is that Diddy? Usher? LL Cool J? Jessica Alba? Magic? Paris Hilton? The Stones? And the penetration is worldwide: There are 234 countries that watch the game, with 54 international broadcasters using 32 different languages; 130 international media organizations from 18 nations receive credentials. Last season, 133.7 million Americans saw at least a little of the contest; only 122.3 million voted in the 2004 presidential election. And, of course, Super Bowl 40 again will be the highest-rated television event of the year.



ALBERT DICKSON / TSN

Still, amid all the hugeness of this 40th renewal—does the NFL always answer yes at the drive-through when asked, “Do you want to super-size?”—it is just as important to see this game in another context: how it represents what the league once was, what it has become and what it might be in the future.

Three days before kickoff, Gene Upshaw, executive director of the players association, makes not-so-subtle hints about the intent of the union if a new collective bargaining agreement can't be negotiated. He uses such words as *lockout* and *decertification*—ridiculous words given the economic fortunes of the NFL and its players. No one seriously thinks it will develop into a situation in which no new CBA will exist when the current one expires after the 2007 season. No one seriously thinks that the

labor messes that have sullied both the NBA and NHL recently will afflict the NFL, either.

Yet, the mere fact both Tagliabue and Upshaw want a new agreement but still don't have one says volumes about the discord that exists within Tagliabue's constituency. If you want to see how much the league has changed, just consider the owners of Pittsburgh and Seattle. Rooney's family has owned the Steelers since 1932. He sits daily in his office at the team complex; his sons are integral parts of the organization; he knows all of his players by name. Paul Allen has owned the Seahawks for eight-plus years; it is just another business interest for one of the world's richest men, a co-founder of Microsoft. For recreation, Rooney flies his own small plane; Allen finances private spaceships that fly into other worlds.

With the death of Giants owner Wellington Mara last fall, Rooney is the lone owner with links to the core foundation of the NFL. Allen is the new NFL ownership, the driven deep pockets who want to grow wealth as much as cultivate championships. And it is those owners—Dan Snyder, Jerry Jones, Bob McNair, Robert Kraft—who have stalled the new CBA. They have developed new streams of revenue through parking, signage, sponsorships and local media rights that have generated extra income above what other clubs can equal. In a league of *share and share alike* that has flourished financially because the “old” owners long ago agreed to split equally the television bonanza, this tilts the playing field. Now, Tagliabue must persuade these new owners to level off things again before any CBA can be signed.

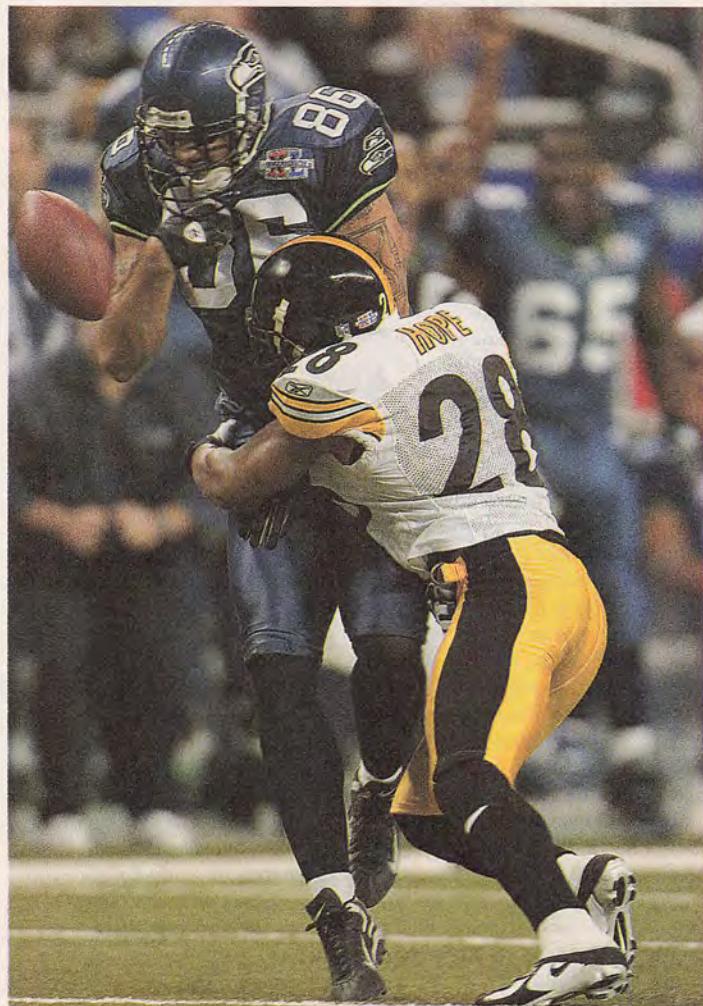
Facing everyone is the nightmare of 2007, an uncapped year under the current CBA. That means there will be no restrictions on how much owners can spend on players. And it is the cap, along with the free-agent market, that has produced the wonderful competitive balance of today's NFL, where 11 teams have played in the seven Super Bowls

of this century, where awful clubs have realistic playoff hopes for next season.

“When free agency started, fans were saying, ‘I have guys I have rooted for my whole life and now they will be gone; I don't know who these players are that now are on my team,’ ” says Texans general manager Charley Casserly, a 29-year NFL veteran. “Now these same fans are saying, ‘Every year, we have a chance.’ It's become a 12-month league, a hot-stove league mentality that

system, even for a year, is stupid. And to go into 2008 without a contract is the height of idiocy.

But with heightened visibility have come new pressures. Coaches feel it most. Here is a championship game featuring two of the longest-tenured coaches in the league, yet this new era of owners doesn't have the patience of a Rooney, who has employed two coaches in the past 37 years, or



BOB LEVERONE / TSN

Chris Hope and his hard-hitting defensive mates kept Stevens and the Seahawks' offense from making much of an impact.

never existed before. You go from the Super Bowl to, *boom*, free agency, to *boom*, the Combine, to *boom*, the draft, to *boom*, training camp. It has increased the visibility of the league to new heights.” To risk damaging this

Allen, who has stayed with Mike Holmgren for seven. Ten coaching jobs alone have come open since the start of the 2005 season; there have been 19 coaching changes out of 32 teams the past two years.



The Steelers wrote the happiest of endings to Bettis' fairy-tale final season.

"These new owners have spent a tremendous amount of money to buy a franchise, and they want quick results," FOX Sports analyst and former Cowboys and Dolphins coach Jimmy Johnson says. "Even though they are very intelligent people, they are not a lot different than the guys who paint their face and sit in the stadium. The only difference is they have a lot more money, and so sometimes they make decisions about coaches that don't involve patience."

This instability also trickles down to quarterback, a position at which the quality of play slipped badly this season. And this Super Bowl just added to the confusion. Do you continue to choose quarterbacks high in the draft, as exemplified by Ben Roethlisberger (11th player in the 2004 draft), even though so many of these top guys have fizzled? And because Roethlisberger excelled even as a rookie, do you start young quarterbacks in their first or second years even though so many of these youngsters struggle because of inexperience? Isn't it far better to develop quarterbacks methodically, much as it took Hasselbeck, a

ROBERT SEALE / TSN

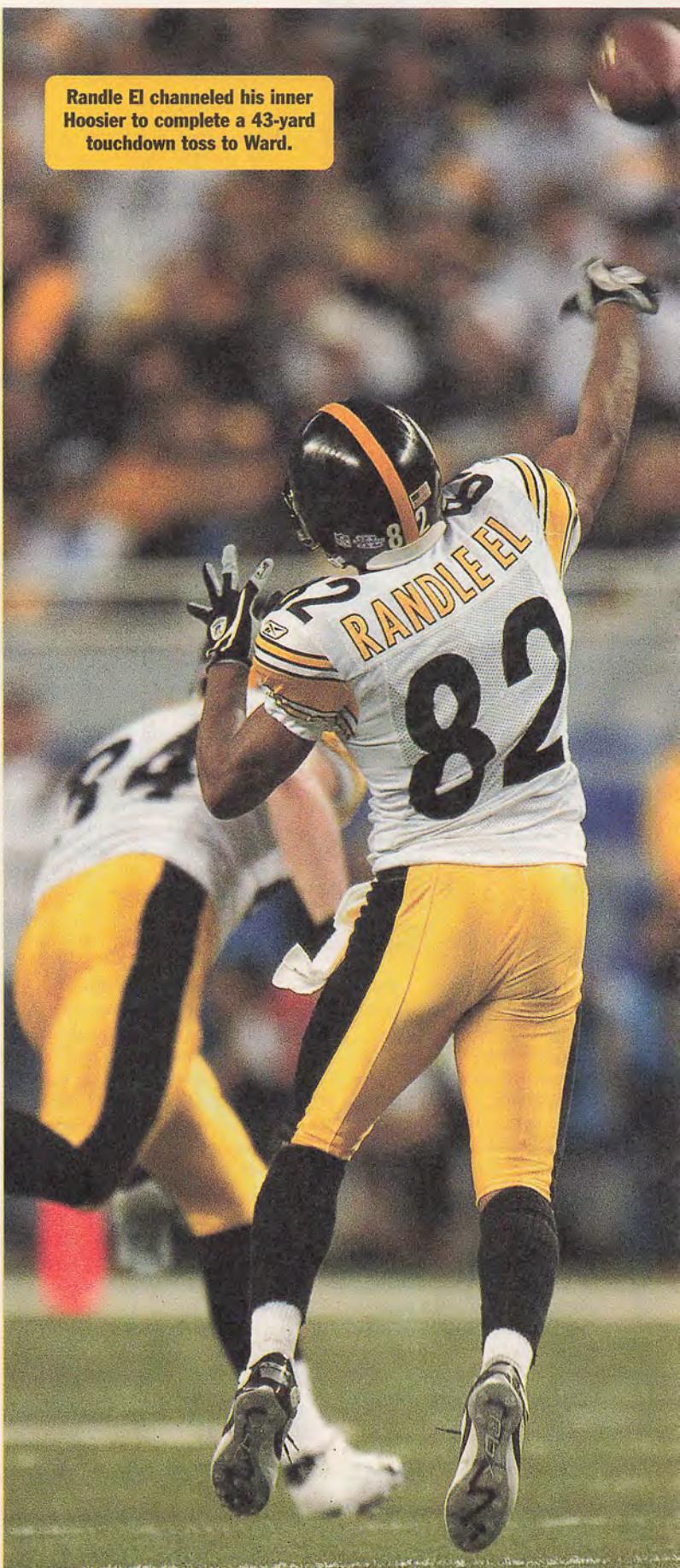
sixth-round pick, three years before he started and eight to play in a Super Bowl?

"But what are you going to do as a coach these days?" CBS Sports analyst Solomon Wilcots asks. "You see your peers being fired and owners without patience and you have this young, high-priced quarterback and the owner is wondering why he is not playing and you feel, 'Maybe I need to find out quickly if this guy can play because I might not have a lot of years to bring him along.'"

So what once made sense in the NFL no longer is on the screen. These now are franchises worth up to \$1 billion or more—there's that billion number again—and the league is as much about developing revenue as it is on-field competition. Consider the growth of the NFL Network. This fall, the network will show eight games live on Thursdays and Saturdays even though it still lacks overwhelming national cable penetration. The NFL says not to worry; free television will remain supreme. Yet, who would have thought that, after 36 years, *Monday Night Football*, the crown jewel of the league's television package, would leave free television for ESPN?

"I just worry about overexposure," says analyst John Madden, voted into the Hall of Fame last Saturday. "I don't want us to become like college basketball or football where you have games on every night. That's the direction that it's going in, and I really don't know it's a great direction."

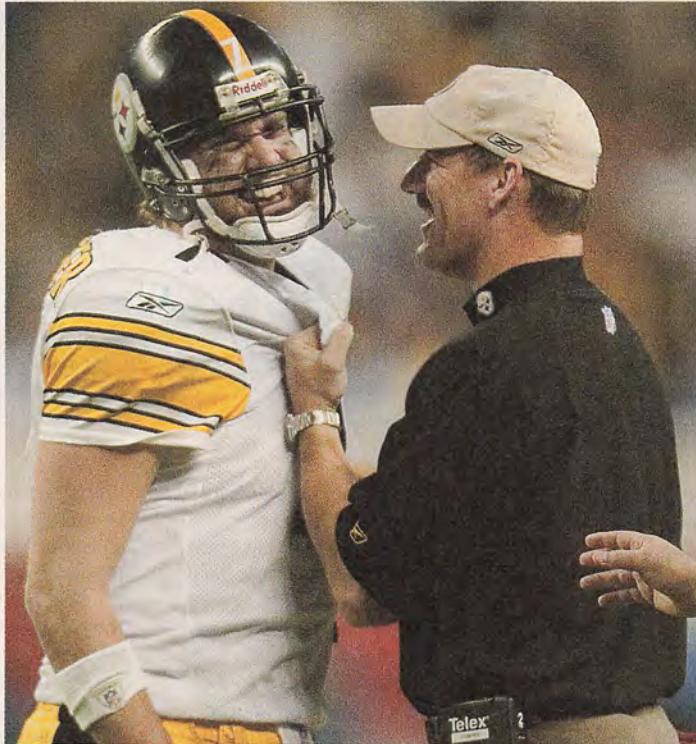
Randle El channeled his inner Hoosier to complete a 43-yard touchdown toss to Ward.



BLOG ALERT

 If there were an award for Most Valuable Game Plans throughout the playoffs, Ken Whisenhunt would walk away with it. 

Vinnie Iyer has to hand it to the guy who called those trick plays for the Steelers. Were you equally impressed? Share your thoughts on sportingnews.com.



BOB LEVERONE / TSN

As Ben and Bill can attest, it's all sunshine and butterflies when you emerge from a Super Bowl battle victorious.

For now, though, things are right, at least in Pittsburgh. But it certainly wasn't easy. After all, the Steelers triumph despite a fretful struggle by Roethlisberger, who played so well in the postseason but completes just nine of 21 attempts in this one for 123 yards, one interception and a woeful rating of 22.6, lowest of any winning quarterback in Super Bowl history. Still, he now is the youngest quarterback to win this game, in part because of a special first half play, a 37-yard strike to Ward off a scramble that sets up his own 1-yard touchdown run, good for a 7-3 halftime lead when Pittsburgh did nothing else in the first 30 minutes. And later, after the game, he too cries, sitting by his locker, head in his hands. Seattle accomplishes more in the first half, but an offensive interference call on receiver Darrell Jackson in the end zone nullifies his scoring grab.

Two other significant plays wrap up the game for the Steelers. The first comes on the second play of the third quarter, when Willie Parker rips off a record 75-yard touchdown scamper. Then in the final period, Pittsburgh resorts to one of its gadget calls, a pass by receiver Antwaan Randle El off a reverse

that results in a 43-yard score to Ward. In between those plays, both quarterbacks throw awful interceptions and the Steelers accomplish what no one else in the playoffs had been able to do: control things against Seattle by running it. Pittsburgh finishes with 181 rushing yards, enough to support a defense that frustrates a more efficient opponent.

Seattle, trying to win its first Super Bowl, also is frustrated with its own inconsistencies. Here's how it unfolds for the Seahawks, normally one of the league's best red zone teams. Early in the fourth, trailing 14-10, a Hasselbeck completion to tight end Jerramy Stevens at the Steelers' 1-yard line is nullified by a holding penalty. Three plays later, Hasselbeck is intercepted, and Pittsburgh then scores moments later on the Randle El pass to go up by 11. "We did a lot of things right," says Seahawks center Robbie Tobeck. "We just couldn't finish them like we normally do."

But the Steelers finish what they set out to do: reward Rooney, get a ring for Cowher, send out Bettis with a flourish. And now it starts all over. "We've finished with rings for one hand," offensive tackle Max Starks says. "Now we'll start working on the second hand."

TSN

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Big shoes left

An early injury moved Seahawks safety ERIC PRUITT from the sideline to the field for Super Bowl 40—and left the secondary without its leader
By Dan Pompei

Matt Hasselbeck is sitting on carpeted steps outside the visiting locker room at Ford Field Saturday afternoon, the day before Super Bowl 40. The Seahawks quarterback is sipping Gatorade. A week in a hotel will dehydrate a guy.

He is talking about how the Seahawks' season has been about accountability. About how he and his teammates lock arms before every game in a giant circle in the middle of their locker room.

About how some cry, some pray, some curse. About trusting that person next to you.

Hasselbeck has goose bumps.

"Someone is going to get hurt in this game," he says. "It's a fact. Someone who thinks he is a backup is going to have to play, and maybe play a huge role in this game. Who knows who that person is? You have to be ready."

Hasselbeck didn't know it at the time, but he was talking about Eric Pruitt.

Pruitt was cut by the Falcons twice last year after they drafted him in the sixth round. He spent part of that season on Atlanta's practice squad and most of this season on the Seahawks' inactive list. At the start of the year, it didn't look like he would sniff the

field as the third-string safety. But his fate was to become a central figure for the Seahawks both in their Super Bowl loss and in their preparations for the game.

Pruitt was called on the field early in the second quarter after starting free safety Marquand Manuel injured his hip. All the speeches about accountability were lost in the glare of the country's brightest spotlight. "It was the Super Bowl," Pruitt said afterwards. "That made it more difficult and more nerve-wracking for me. They had to calm me down a whole lot."

Manuel had started for the Seahawks since Week 7, when Ken Hamlin was lost for the season after a bar fight, and Manuel had become a unifying force in the secondary.

Seneca Wallace was repeatedly intercepted when he was the quarterback of the Seahawks'

SEE A DIFFERENT GAME

Senior writer Dan Pompei, the pool reporter for the Seahawks for the Pro Football Writers of America, was the only reporter who had access to their practices during Super Bowl week.

scout team during practices for the Super Bowl. "They know exactly what they're doing," he said of the Seahawks' secondary after one of the practices.

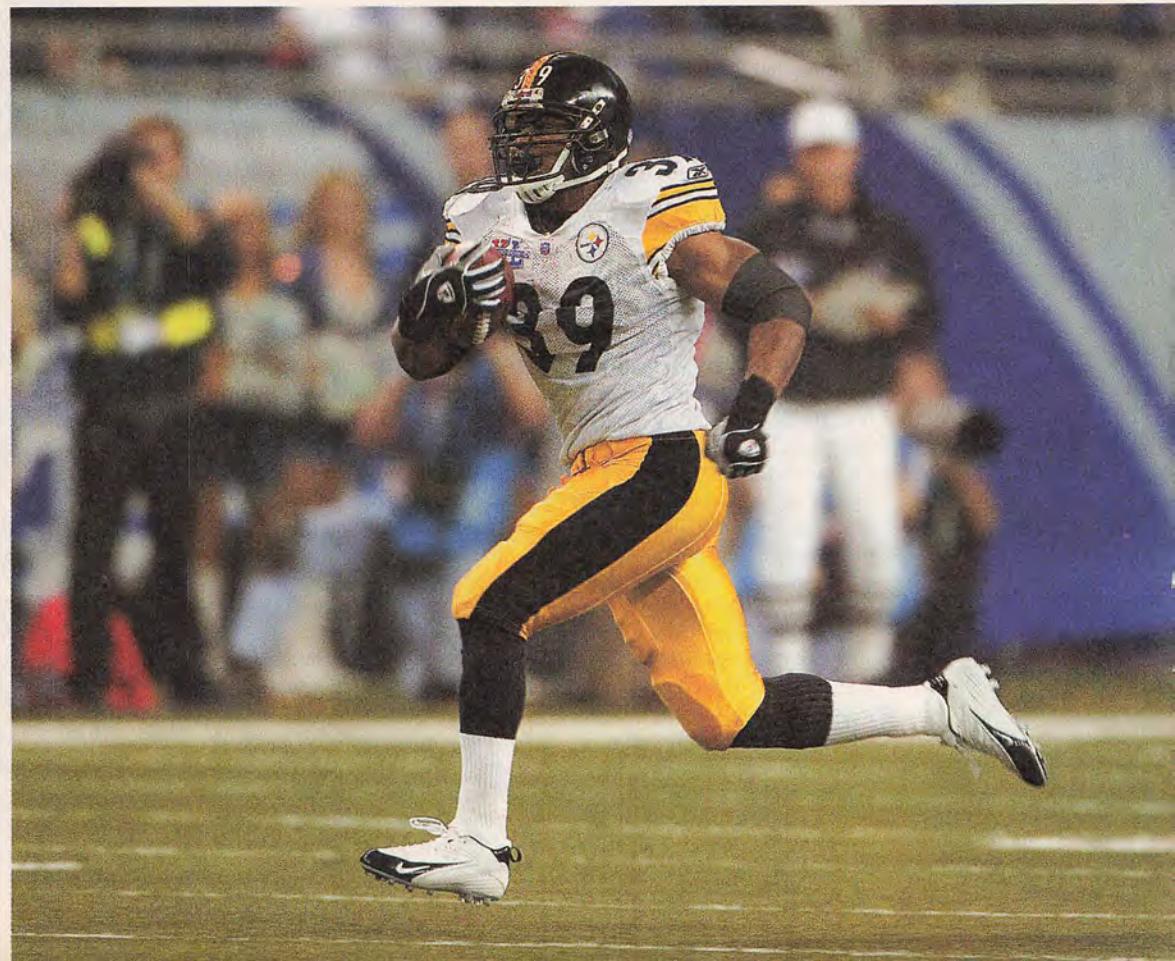
"They're coached back there by Marquand Manuel. He makes sure everybody is in the right spots."

Manuel's absence meant the Seahawks lost a player who didn't make many mistakes and helped prevent others from making them. Super Bowl 40 came down to two plays for the Seahawks, and Manuel could have changed both.

The first was a 75-yard touchdown run by the Steelers'

Willie Parker, who followed pulling guard Alan Faneca over the right side. Strong safety Michael Bouware was in position to make the play, but he said he expected the run to spill to the outside. Instead, Parker cut inside. That left Pruitt as the only player who could tackle Parker, but he was out of position. "That was something I saw late," Pruitt said. "It bounced up the middle. I tried to get over and trip him up, but that boy's fast. He's really fast."

The second play was a 43-yard touchdown pass from receiver Antwaan Randle El to Hines Ward.



unfilled

Steelers quarterback Ben Roethlisberger pitched to Parker, who handed off to Randle El. Pruitt was responsible for the deep half on the left side of the field in cover 2, but he bit when Roethlisberger handed off to Parker. Ward came from the right and caught the ball near the center of the field. "I wasn't supposed to go rushing up there," Pruitt said. "I was supposed to hang back a little."

What made it maddening was the Seahawks anticipated the play and practiced against it twice during the week. The Steelers ran it out of a formation that surprised some Seahawks defenders, however. "We worked on all that stuff," Seahawks defensive coordinator Ray Rhodes said.

At least the Seahawks' starters had. While preparing for the Steelers, Pruitt estimates he had

only 15 or 20 practice reps with the first team, far fewer snaps than he took in the game. "It was definitely a hard situation for E.P.," Pruitt said. "He didn't get as many reps as normal, so we kind of threw him under the bus. We definitely missed Marquand, and I feel sorry for E.P. being put in that situation."

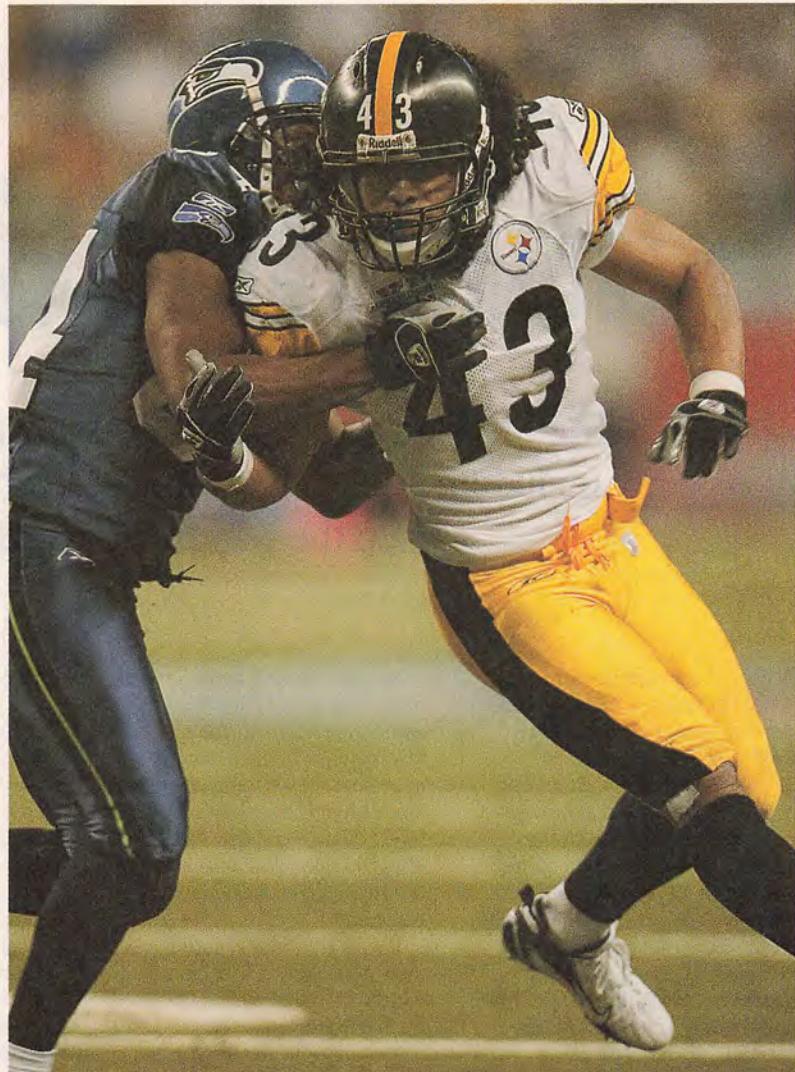
In the two weeks before the big game, Pruitt's main responsibility had been to imitate Steelers Pro Bowl safety Troy Polamalu. Pruitt prepared for his role by watching tape of Polamalu and taking instructions from quality control coach Gary Reynolds, who ensures that the scout team defense accurately simulates the defense of the Seahawks' opponent.

Instead of the white jerseys the rest of the Seahawks' defenders wore, Pruitt wore red. *The better for Hasselbeck to see you, my dear.*

With energy and intensity, Pruitt played a decent Polamalu, though his hair was several feet shorter than it should have been. Defensive end Bryce Fisher addressed that by trying to talk Pruitt into wearing a Polamalu wig, but Pruitt would have none of it. "I said, 'I ain't wearing no wig,'" Pruitt said. "I see that as disrespectful to him. I don't know if it's because of his religion that he has long hair or if he's just wearing it."

Pruitt had no problem with the red jersey, which normally is worn only by quarterbacks as a form of a stop sign for defenders. Pruitt asked coach Mike

Pruitt came up short in running down Parker—and in taking over for Manuel.



BOB LEVERONE / TSN (2)

Polamalu may not have been wearing a red jersey on game day, but the Seahawks were well aware of his whereabouts throughout the game.

Holmgren if offensive players were allowed to touch him when he wore the red, but Pruitt was told the quarterback rule did not apply. "I laughed," he said. "They kept putting their hands on me when I was blitzing or trying to reroute guys. I guess I was a little different from the quarterback."

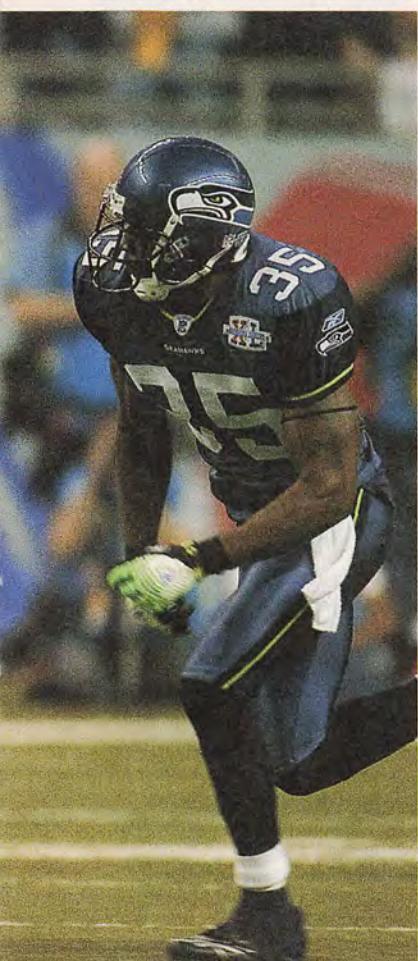
The red jersey was a reminder for Hasselbeck to always know where Polamalu was. The Seahawks' plan, at least most of the time, was to run their play regardless of what Polamalu was doing. The key, Hasselbeck said, was to not be sold by Polamalu's presnap theatrics. Once Hasselbeck could identify Polamalu's responsibility on a given play, he could determine where the ball should go.

In the game, the Seahawks' preparations served them well. Polamalu was not much of a factor, and the Seahawks' only

touchdown came on a play in which they took advantage of him. Polamalu was responsible for Seahawks tight end Jerramy Stevens, and the Seahawks freed Stevens by having another receiver run between him and Polamalu. The result was a 16-yard touchdown pass.

From watching practice, it appeared Hasselbeck had Polamalu's number. But all that really meant was that he had Pruitt's number. Hasselbeck caught Pruitt out of position several times and went up top for deep completions. Once it happened when Pruitt tried to duplicate Polamalu's "spin blitz." Said Pruitt, "It didn't work as good as his. He's an incredible guy."

It was a week of challenges for Pruitt. "It wasn't such a pleasant experience," he said in the locker room after the game. "But it was a learning experience." **TSN**



Pruitt came up short in running down Parker—and in taking over for Manuel.



Basic instinct

The Steelers' knack for effectively mixing blitzes—including one of the simplest in the book—helped pave the way to victory *By Dennis Dillon*

All sorts of descriptive words about the Steelers' blitz package were tossed about during the week before Super Bowl 40. *Surprise* and *disguise*. *Exotic* and *confusing*. *Dangerous* and *risky*.

Then you heard about the perpetrators of this DNA of the Pittsburgh "D." Seahawks offensive coordinator Gil Haskell referred to strong safety Troy Polamalu as "the disrupter" because of his ability to blitz from anywhere at any time. Haskell gave a dual identity to Joey Porter, whose 10½ sacks were the most by any NFL linebacker during the regular season, comparing him to both Lawrence Taylor and Charles Haley. Then there was Clark Haggans, Porter's partner on the other side, who had nine sacks.

So you watched and waited all night long inside Ford Field, wondering what kind of legerdemain Steelers defensive coordinator Dick LeBeau would use against the Seahawks' West Coast offense and quarterback Matt Hasselbeck. Then came the surprise: The biggest play was a basic one.

Facing third-and-8 at the Pittsburgh 47 and trailing, 21-10, with 6:36 left, the Seahawks lined up in a four-wide receiver formation. The Steelers countered with six defensive backs. At the snap, they used a play from Zone Blitzing 101. Cornerback Deshea Townsend and linebacker James Farrior swooped in from the left side while Porter dropped into coverage on the other side. It was

one man more than the Seahawks were set up to block.

"He had to pick his poison," Townsend said of Seattle right guard Chris Gray, "and he picked James." Hasselbeck, who was looking to his left, never saw Townsend. "He had his back turned to me. There was no escape." Townsend sacked Hasselbeck for a 5-yard loss, forcing a punt. On the ensuing possession, the Steelers subtracted almost 4½ minutes off the clock and forced Seattle to use all three of its timeouts. By the time the Seahawks got the ball back, there was 1:51 left and the Steelers were celebrating their fifth Super Bowl championship.

For most of the game, Seattle had an antidote for Pittsburgh's poison. The Steelers blitzed often early, but a Seahawks blocker usually picked it up or Hasselbeck deftly beat it with three-step drops and quick passes to the outside.

"He was getting rid of the ball so fast, but that's what the West Coast offense is designed for—quick plays," said Steelers free safety Chris Hope in Pittsburgh's rowdy locker room, where backup corner Willie Williams passed out Romeo y Julieta cigars to players and coaches.

For a spell in the middle of the game, the Steelers rushed only their three linemen—nose tackle Casey Hampton and ends Aaron Smith and Kimo von Oelhoffen. They dropped their other



ALBERT DICKSON / TSN

Point-blank

D-CAF! D-CAF! Your team will need more than a high-octane offense if it wants to win the Super Bowl. The teams of the '90s were known for being scoring machines—every champ but the 1990 Giants was in the top three in scoring during that span—but Baltimore broke that mold in 2000. From that point on, each winner has been at or near the top in scoring defense. And when it comes to ranking high in offensive points production, well, that has been optional. —Zach Bodenbeck

Regular season	SB winner	Defensive scoring rank	Offensive scoring rank
2005	Steelers	T3	9
2004	Patriots	T2	4
2003	Patriots	1	12
2002	Buccaneers	1	18
2001	Patriots	6	6
2000	Ravens	1	14

defenders into coverage. But you knew eventually Blitzburgh would erupt.

"If you're going to cock the gun," said LeBeau, "you've got to shoot it every now and then."

The Steelers might not have sliced and diced Seattle with the blitz, but their defense made the necessary plays. Although the Seahawks gained 396 yards, Hasselbeck was sacked three times and intercepted once, by cornerback Ike Taylor at the Pittsburgh 5. Four plays later,



Simplicity is a virtue, as Townsend proved when he came off the blitz to nail Hasselbeck for a sack.

Antwaan Randle El's 43-yard pass to Hines Ward off a wide receiver reverse gave the Steelers a 21-10 lead. Most impressive, the Steelers held the Seahawks, who ranked No. 1 in scoring during the regular season, 18 points below their average.

"We handled it well," Hasselbeck said of the Steelers' blitz. "But just picking up the blitz, that's not the end of the deal. You've still got to throw and catch or run. The bottom line is we just stalled out in the red

zone. We had opportunities to score touchdowns and didn't."

The father of the zone blitz, LeBeau once used a defensive alignment with only linebackers and defensive backs—no linemen. The idea was the offense wouldn't be able to identify who would blitz. "It was like a bunch of ants running around," he said. "It wasn't quite as good when they ran the fullback off tackle,

but it was real good when they tried to pass."

LeBeau, 68, is a conservative gentleman who doesn't play the lottery and never has stepped inside a casino. He will take an occasional risk on a golf course, where he might try to reach a par-5 in two strokes. But get him near a football field and he turns into a riverboat gambler. "Surprise is a good element in competitive athletics," he said late last Friday afternoon after polishing off a club sandwich in

his 10th-floor room at the Steelers' team hotel in Pontiac.

LeBeau learned about pressure defense when he was a defensive back for the Lions from 1959-72. He went to three Pro Bowls (1964-66), intercepted 62 passes and still holds the NFL record for consecutive starts (171) for a cornerback. In Detroit, LeBeau played for defensive coordinator Jimmy David, a small but feisty coach whose nickname was "the Hatchet."

"He loved to blitz," LeBeau said

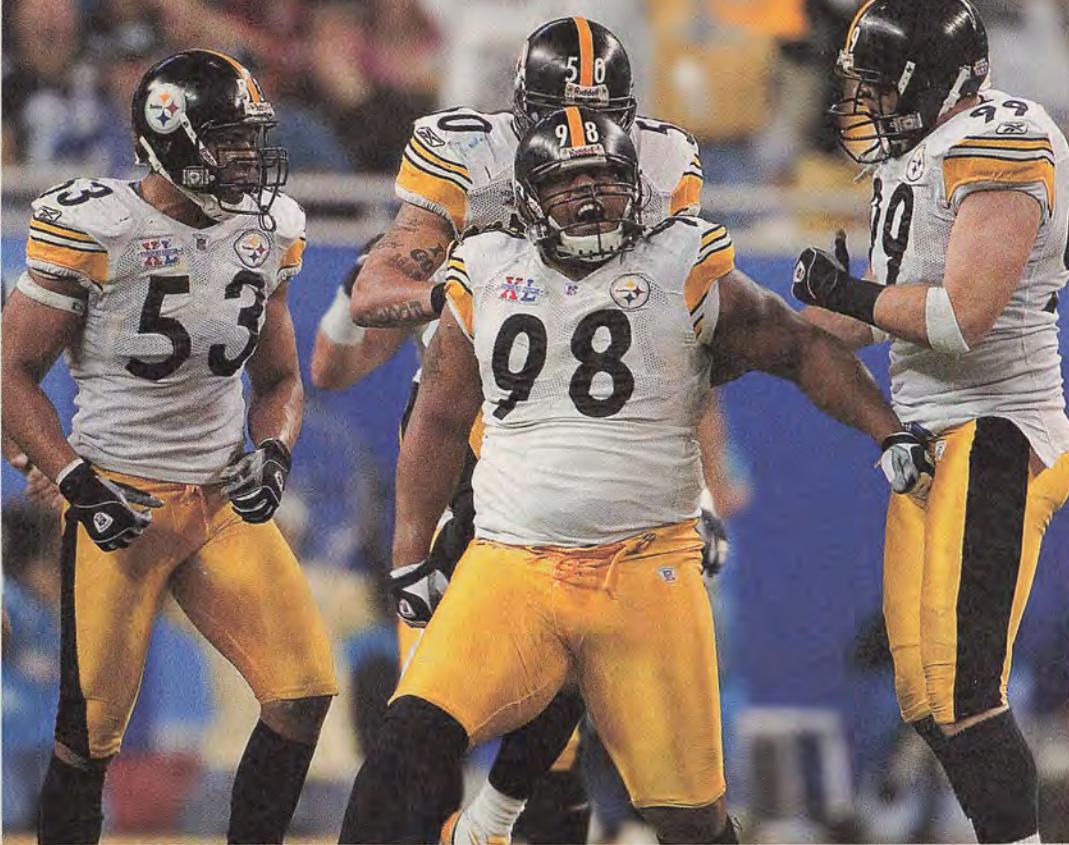


of David. "We'd come in on Wednesday and the whole room would be full with drawings. It looked like a mad scientist's laboratory. We'd go into the game with maybe 20 new blitzes."

That pales in comparison to LeBeau's repertoire. Farrior calls LeBeau "the man behind the madness" and claims half of the Steelers' defensive playbook is filled with blitzes; LeBeau says that's only a slight exaggeration.

"It's just part of our philosophy. We'll blitz anybody," LeBeau said. "I like to win, and it seems to me that teams that can apply pressure—consistent pressure without getting gashed—win more times than they lose. We think we can send most of our players and they'll be effective."

In their divisional playoff victory over Indianapolis, the Steelers blitzed Porter and Farrior from the outside and sent



ALBERT DICKSON / TSN

Charged with the task of tormenting opposing quarterbacks all season long, Hampton (center) and his teammates revel in a job well done.

Final TSN Power Poll

Rank Team	Looking ahead to 2006
1. Steelers	Ben Roethlisberger is the new Tom Brady.
2. Seahawks	Shaun Alexander will cash in; Seahawks fans hope it's in Seattle.
3. Colts	Will they have the edge if they don't have The Edge?
4. Broncos	Terrell Owens could put the Broncos over the top—or drive them down.
5. Panthers	They must find ways to keep Steve Smith from being sextuple covered.
6. Patriots	Bill Belichick and Tom Brady will be back, so they still are top contenders.
7. Bengals	Their hopes ride on Carson Palmer's surgically repaired knee.
8. Bears	The Monsters of the Midway have an offense as scary as Elmo.
9. Jaguars	Jack Del Rio is sold on Byron Leftwich; Jags fans aren't so sure.
10. Chiefs	Larry Johnson isn't far from being the game's best back.
11. Redskins	D.C. has nearly as many lobbyists as Redskins coaches.
12. Giants	Eli Manning needs to improve his accuracy.
13. Chargers	Drew Brees' injured arm could keep Philip Rivers around.
14. Dolphins	They are a competent quarterback away from challenging for the AFC East title.
15. Buccaneers	Chris Simms' impressive playoff start could make it tougher for the Bucs to keep him.
16. Cowboys	Dallas doesn't need many changes to get Bill Parcells back to the playoffs.
17. Falcons	The defense must pick it up because Michael Vick and Warrick Dunn can't do it alone.
18. Vikings	Daunte Culpepper might follow Randy Moss' trail out of town.
19. Ravens	Kyle Boller prepares to make the most of his last chance in Baltimore.
20. Eagles	Donovan McNabb recovers from his sports hernia and credits the soup.
21. Rams	The offense remains explosive. The defense must be less self-destructive.
22. Bills	Eric Moulds' 10-year run in Buffalo appears to be over.
23. Browns	Next year will be better as long as Kellen Winslow stays away from the bikes.
24. Cardinals	Few can slow Arizona's passing game. No one can locate the running game.
25. Jets	Eric Mangini merely needs to redo the entire offense.
26. Lions	The offensive cast is mostly in place, but Detroit needs a quarterback to lead it.
27. Packers	Green Bay fans shiver thinking about the coming Aaron Rodgers era.
28. Titans	When does the Vince Young era begin?
29. Raiders	Oakland—the last team to hire a coach. Would you want to work with Randy Moss?
30. 49ers	They won their last two, but plenty of work lies ahead.
31. Saints	What better way to rebuild a franchise than with a franchise quarterback?
32. Texans	Reggie soon will be the most popular Bush in Houston.

—Rob Hurtt

Polamalu up the middle. It was effective because the Colts moved their guards to help outside, leaving a void inside. In their AFC championship game victory over Denver, the Steelers brought Porter and Haggans off the ends because they knew Broncos quarterback Jake Plummer liked to roll outside.

The Seahawks were convinced Polamalu would be the man to watch in the Super Bowl. For the two weeks leading to the Super Bowl, they had backup safety Eric Pruitt "impersonate" Polamalu on the scout team. He imitated Polamalu's moves on the field, changing positions often and playing at such a frenzied pace that the Seattle coaches asked that he tone it down.

"He's given us a good look," Haskell said during the week, talking about Pruitt's contributions in practice. "Now (Polamalu) is faster, but at least we've seen it in practice."

Perhaps the Seahawks also should have had someone on their scout team acting as Townsend coming off a zone blitz. That might have seemed too simple. But sometimes a basic play can be the big one.

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DRAFT FORECAST

The start of a new Bush era in Texas

Pick/Team	Player, position, school	War Room scouts' analysis
1. Texans	Reggie Bush , RB, USC	Instantly would make the offense more dynamic; can be used in multiple roles.
2. Saints	Matt Leinart , QB, USC	A big pocket passer who would willingly accept his role as the franchise guy.
3. Titans	D'Brickashaw Ferguson , OT, Virginia	Having him as a blind side protector would be a relief to Steve McNair.
4. Jets	A.J. Hawk , OLB, Ohio State	Would help anchor a linebacker unit that includes Pro Bowl player Jonathan Vilma.
5. Packers	Jimmy Williams , CB, Virginia Tech	Is talented and experienced enough to start from Day 1 in the Pack's weak secondary.
6. Raiders*	Mario Williams , DE, N.C. State	With his power and speed, would be a solid two-way end and potentially a dominant pass rusher.
7. 49ers*	Chad Greenway , OLB, Iowa	Playmaking ability and versatility would benefit a defense that struggled in 2005.
8. Bills	Haloti Ngata , DT, Oregon	Is the dominant run stuffer the team needs to address its weaknesses up the middle.
9. Lions	Michael Huff , S, Texas	Secondary needs a leader to unite a talented but disjointed unit.
10. Cardinals	Vince Young , QB, Texas	They would be thrilled to team such a talented prospect with their playmaking wideouts.
11. Rams	Vernon Davis , TE, Maryland	The type of two-way tight end St. Louis needs to make the transition to a more balanced attack.
12. Browns	DeMeco Ryans , OLB, Alabama	Has the athleticism and speed to play in the open field and make an impact rushing the passer.
13. Ravens	LenDale White , RB, USC	Possesses the size-speed combo the Ravens need to re-establish their physical style on offense.
14. Eagles	Mathias Kiwanuka , DE, Boston College	Despite Senior Bowl struggles, still has rare size, speed and athleticism.
15. Falcons	Tye Hill , CB, Clemson	Atlanta likes to attack with its front seven and needs corners who can play man-to-man outside.
16. Dolphins	Jay Cutler , QB, Vanderbilt	Will fall out of the top 10 once the hype dies down, much to Miami's delight.
17. Vikings	Laurence Maroney , RB, Minnesota	Fits the Vikings' need for a playmaking back to supplant Michael Bennett.
18. Cowboys	Santonio Holmes , WR, Ohio State	Deep threat who could take pressure off Terry Glenn; also is a dynamic return man.
19. Chargers	Max Jean-Gilles , G, Georgia	An upgrade in the interior line is needed to pave the way for LaDainian Tomlinson.
20. Chiefs	Chad Jackson , WR, Florida	The passing game needs more weapons to stretch the field and create running room for Larry Johnson.
21. Patriots	DeAngelo Williams , RB, Memphis	A value pick who would provide insurance if Corey Dillon broke down again.
22. Broncos**	Tamba Hali , DE, Penn State	Adding a productive pass rusher would take heat off the secondary.
23. Buccaneers	Winston Justice , OT, USC	A right tackle in college, Justice could protect lefthanded QB Chris Simms.
24. Bengals	Nick Mangold , C, Ohio State	They need a good young center to succeed Rich Braham and protect Carson Palmer.
25. Giants	Ashton Youboty , CB, Ohio State	Fills a major need for Tom Coughlin, who focused on cornerback prospects at the Senior Bowl.
26. Bears	Leonard Pope , TE, Georgia	Chicago needs a tight end who can block and catch passes in close quarters.
27. Panthers	Marcus McNeill , OT, Auburn	Despite other needs, they can't pass on McNeill, who would be a nice complement to RT Jordan Gross.
28. Jaguars	D'Qwell Jackson , ILB, Maryland	Jack Del Rio loves playmaking linebackers who can run.
29. Broncos	Darnell Bing , S, USC	Can play center field and learn from Pro Bowl S John Lynch while shoring up the secondary.
30. Colts	Thomas Howard , OLB, UTEP	Has the speed Tony Dungy seeks at outside linebacker; is athletic enough to cover tight ends.
31. Seahawks	Ko Simpson , S, South Carolina	An upgrade at free safety; his speed and athleticism would make the secondary more versatile.
32. Steelers	Rodrique Wright , DT, Texas	Has the size and athleticism to play end or tackle in a 3-4 scheme.

*Order to be determined by coin flip

**Pick from Redskins



They will be super in '06

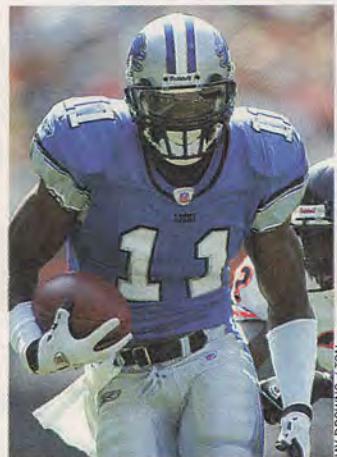
Three players who are ready to rise to new heights next season:

Ronnie Brown, RB, Dolphins. With the potential trade of Ricky Williams, there is a good chance Brown will carry the load for the playoff-minded Dolphins. Brown has the receiving skills to complement his ability to pound as a runner, but he must shake his fumbling problems. Considering he rushed for 907 yards as a rookie despite splitting carries with Williams, it's realistic to expect Brown to gain 1,600-plus yards from scrimmage if he gets 350-plus touches.

Roy Williams, WR, Lions. The offense in the Motor City was stuck in neutral this season largely because of shaky play at quarterback and running back, but Williams provided the brightest spot. He must avoid injury bugaboos, but considering he has 16 touchdown catches in only 23 starts, he is set up for a breakout third year in what's likely to be a more downfield-oriented passing game.

DeMarcus Ware, OLB, Cowboys. Ware's talent and edge pass-rushing role are similar to those of the Chargers' Shawne Merriman. Once Ware had a good grasp of the defense and Dallas' coaches let him showcase his quickness, he came on strong as a sack artist late in 2005. He will be a nightmare for quarterbacks in '06. —V.I.

If you thought Brown was good in 2005, baby, you ain't seen nothin' yet.



Looking for a third-year receiver who will break out in 2006? Cast a glance Williams' way.

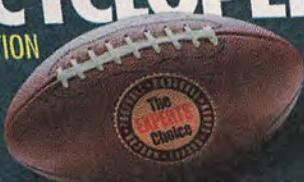
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The

COLLEGE

So what's it *really* like to be Big Man—or Woman—on Campus? Some of our college **BLOGGERS** followed athletes from their schools for a day. You might be surprised what they found.

Since arriving on campus in fall 2004, Stephen McGee has been anointed the second coming of Texas A&M quarterback great Bucky Richardson. McGee, a redshirt freshman last fall, thrilled Aggies fans with his performance against Texas in the season finale—rushing for 108 yards and two touchdowns in his first start and offering hope next season could be the start of something special.

But before working on becoming a Kyle Field legend, McGee works in some batting practice—with offensive coordinator Les Koenning.

The two head for the lower level of the expansive weight room at Bright Football Complex. They find a ball and bat and proceed to play pitcher and batter. The game goes on for about 20 minutes until Koenning strikes out McGee for the third time.

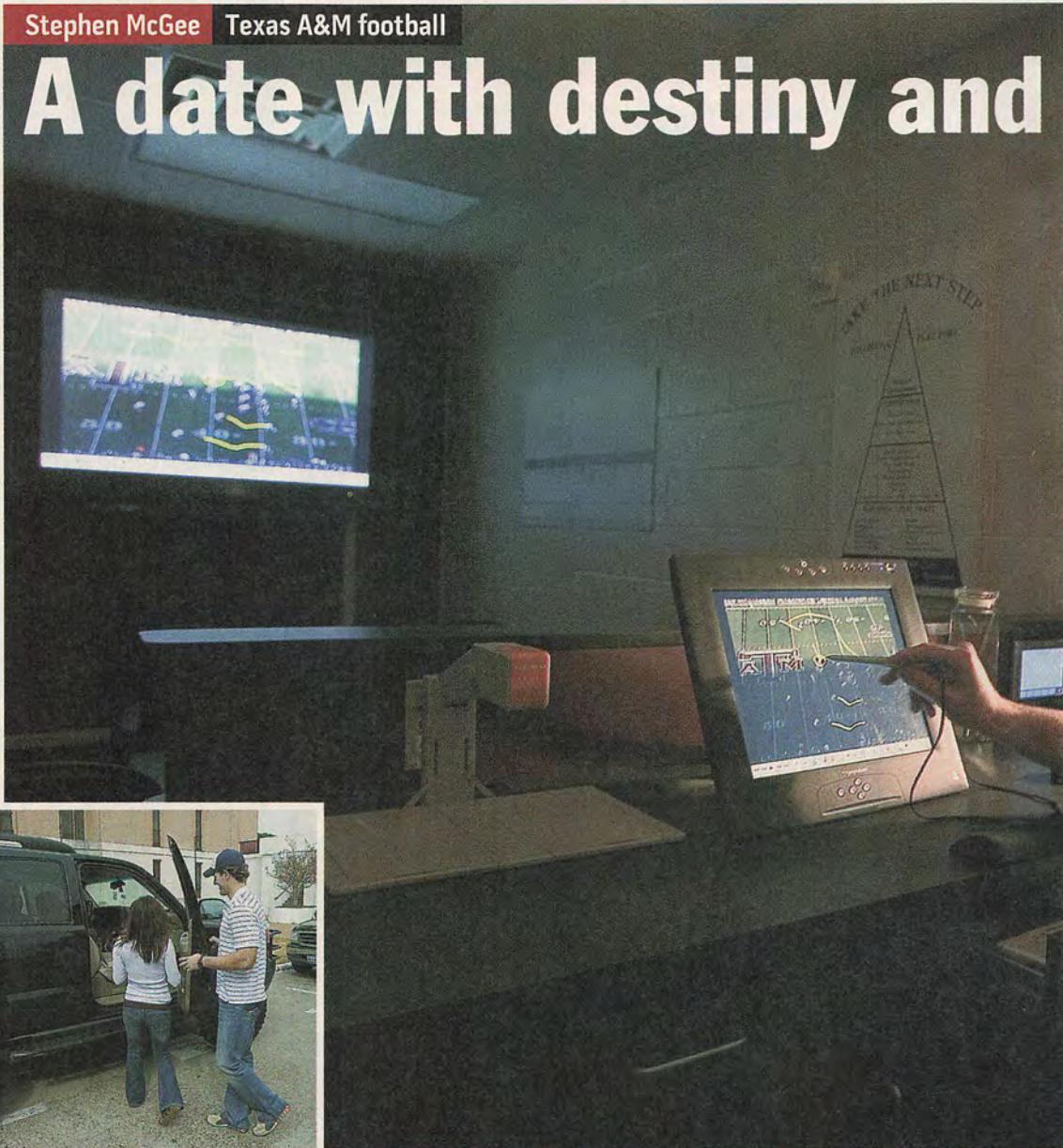
McGee slams his bat in disgust and complains to Koenning that the last pitch was a ball. The two rib each other, looking more like father and son than coach and pupil, until McGee's phone rings.

His girlfriend, Liddy Bisanz, is wondering when McGee is going to be ready to grab some lunch. McGee calls the game a tie and heads for the parking lot.

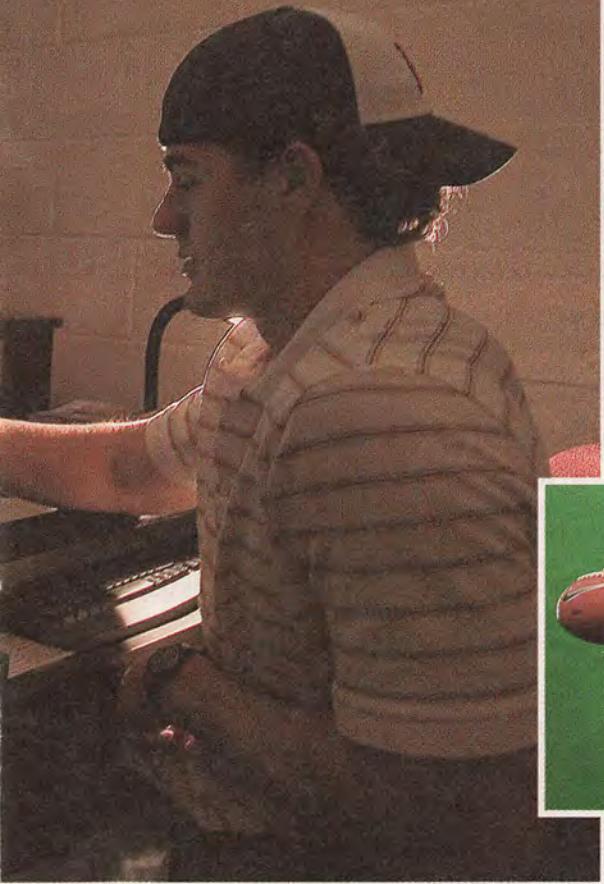
His car is a true Texas machine: a 2004 Chevrolet Z71 Tahoe. The jet-black SUV has a 3-inch lift, a grill guard that matches McGee's rugged style and two bumper stickers on the back: One

Stephen McGee Texas A&M football

A date with destiny and



life a girlfriend



PHOTOS BY ROBERT SEALE / TSN (4)



represents Texas A&M University and the other the Texas Trophy Hunters Association.

At Bisanz's dorm, McGee gets out of his vehicle, opens the door for her and makes sure she's completely in before shutting it.

"He is always a gentleman," Bisanz says. "I always remember him opening the door for me and doing kind things."

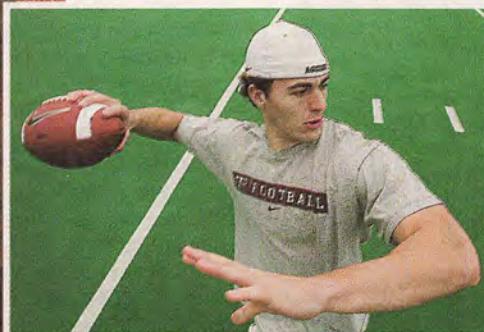
The two head to McAlister's Deli, a small sandwich shop. Along the way, they discuss classes, McGee's new Red Sox cap and the last parking ticket he received. "I hate these things," he says of his most recent ticket. "I just keep getting them all the time."

McGee opens a compartment in his car door and pulls out several unpaid parking tickets. "I probably need to pay this one," he says with a grin.

At lunch McGee orders the McAlister Club, a sandwich piled high with turkey, ham, Swiss cheese, cheddar cheese, lettuce and tomatoes. He slowly eats the sandwich and fruit he ordered, trying to enjoy every minute with Liddy before afternoon weightlifting and film study.

"It's nice to have some time during the offseason to see Liddy and my friends," McGee says, "because once the spring comes around it gets a lot harder to chat and see everyone."

—Jonathan Wall



McGee is a football scholar and a gentleman.



CLIFF GRASSMICK FOR TSN

Erling Christiansen Colorado skiing

Heading for the slopes at sunrise? Someone's gotta do it

As the sun pokes above the horizon on the frosty Front Range, Erling Christiansen is up and ready to go before most Colorado students have hit the snooze button for the first time. Just don't call him a morning person.

"I must admit," Christiansen says, "there are times I wake up and say, 'Aw, there's training today.'"

Christiansen meets with the rest of the Nordic ski team at the team office, and they leave at 7 a.m. sharp for the 21-mile trip to Eldora Mountain Resort. Aboard one of the team's mud-stained white vans, Christiansen grabs a bite to eat. Some endurance athletes eat just a banana or protein bar before training, but Christiansen makes it interesting: He has a roast beef sandwich on the winding, 45-minute ride.

Eldora seems worlds apart from the campus at the chilly base of the Flatiron Mountains. A brisk wind kicks up at the ski area, where fresh snow still is falling. The car ride takes the skiers from 5,430 feet above sea level in Boulder to a dizzying 9,200 feet at the bottom of the ski area. "There are some days it's so windy that we can't open the car doors," Nordic skiing coordinator Bruce Cranmer says. "We call those 'hell-dora' days."

Christiansen, just getting over a cold and a competition at the Montana State Invitational the previous weekend, sets out for an easy recovery session. During the nearly 2-hour workout, he does intervals throughout the winding, dipping trails, going 3 minutes fast and 3 minutes at a comfortable pace. It still proves to be a great workout.

"You'd be skiing up one hill and, by the end of it, you'd be almost dead," Christiansen says.

After another 45-minute ride back down the mountain, Christiansen is able to become a regular college senior again—at least for a while. There are afternoon classes to prepare for (notably War and Morality and Microeconomics) before more training begins late in the afternoon. —Justin Coons

Lots of time underwater—but no basket weaving

Stanford blogger Daniel Novinson found out it's not easy keeping up with 2004 Olympian and college senior Dana Kirk:

5:28 a.m.: Kirk wakes up—"not 5:30 'cause I'll be late, and not 5:25 'cause that's just too early"—in her dorm, about five blocks from the center of campus and the same distance from the pool.

6 a.m.: Practice begins with a modified 1,000-yard medley warmup (200 free, 200 back, 200 free, 200 breast, 200 free). After some short sprints, she rejoins her teammates for the morning's main workout: two sets of five 200s. She calls it a "really easy practice."

7:00 a.m.: The next hour is filled with drills. Kirk works on her form for the backstroke and freestyle, her two weakest events.

8:30 a.m.: A bike ride to one building over lands her at Jimmy V's Sports Cafe. She munches on a bagel and reads for her 10 a.m. class. Though anyone is welcome to eat there, Jimmy V's tends to be a hangout for athletes because it's next to most of the sports facilities. Sure enough, basketball players Tim Morris and Peter Prowitt swing by.

9:45 a.m.: A double major in communications and political science, Kirk heads to her Literary Journalism class. Appropriately, today's class is on reconstructing detailed events.

12 p.m.: Back at the dorm, a "surprisingly pretty good" microwaveable Lean Cuisine panini serves as lunch.

12:30 p.m.: It's time for indulging in a guilty pleasure—spending a half-hour browsing the message boards at CollegeSwimming.com. "It's ridiculous to waste time looking at that stuff, but it's so interesting to see what people are saying about you. I know a lot of other college girls go and read it."

1 p.m.: More Literary Journalism reading.

2:30 p.m.: Practice begins anew with an hour of weightlifting.

3:30 p.m.: Two more hours of pool work focuses on sprints and cardio sets.

6:30 p.m.: Kirk cooks dinner for herself and her two roommates, who are on the rugby team: spaghetti with ground turkey and Ragu.

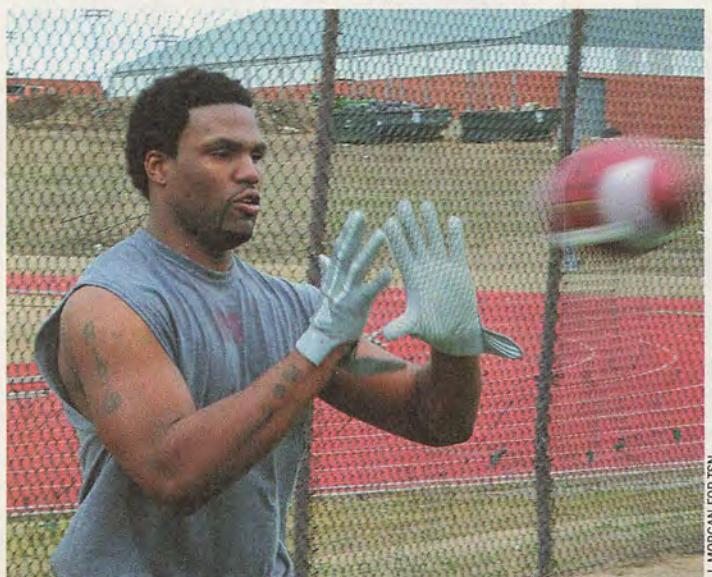
7 p.m.: School isn't out for the day just yet. Children, Youth and the Law is the last class on today's docket.

8:30 p.m.: Class lets out, and Kirk bikes back to her dorm. "I start losing my ability to concentrate as the day goes on," she says.

10 p.m.: Considering tomorrow's 5:28 wakeup, perhaps it's no surprise it's already time for bed.



It's not all pool play for Kirk, who's thankful for her opportunity for a Stanford education.



R.J. MORGAN FOR TSN

Spring practice? First there's plenty of winter work

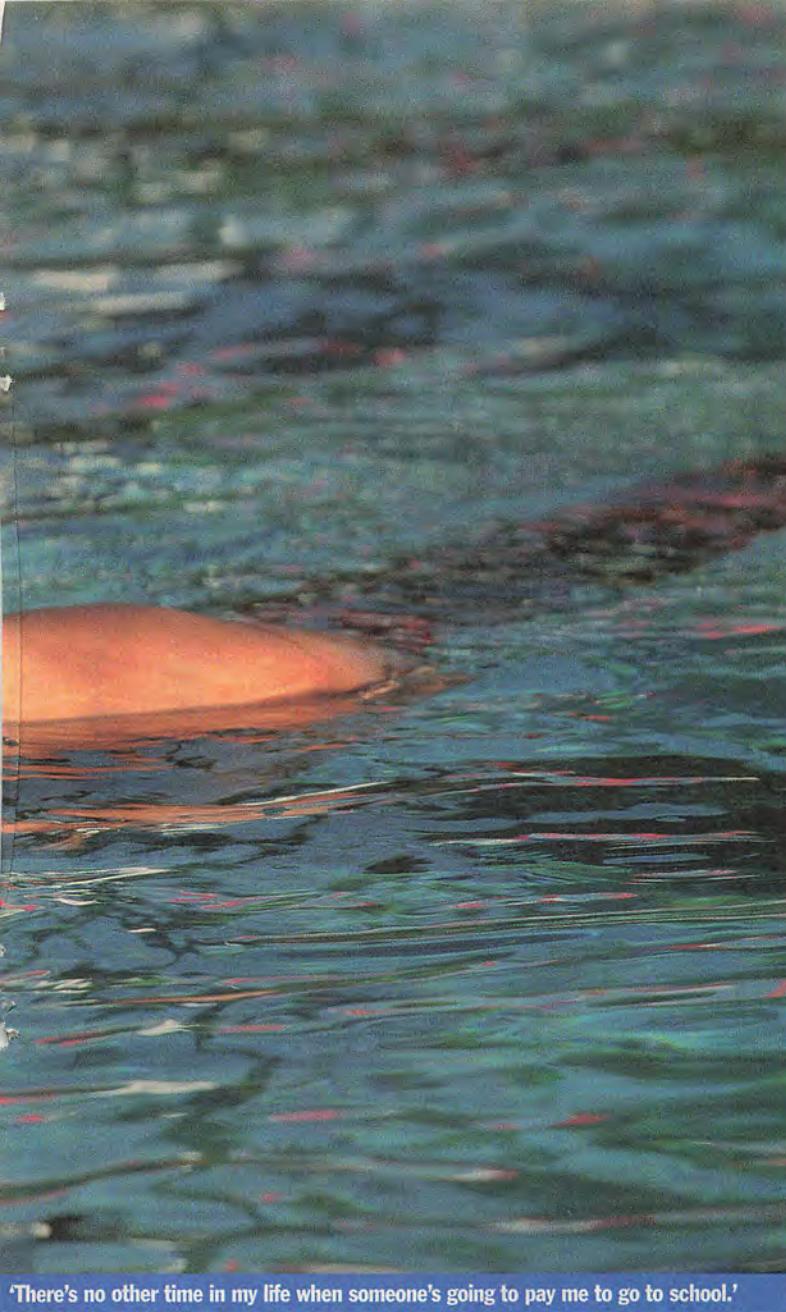
Before a weightlifting session begins at 1 p.m., Mississippi State junior receiver Omarr Conner calls his mother. He spent the weekend at home in Macon, Miss., about an hour's drive from his dorm in Starkville, and he wants to let her know he made it back to school safely.

"The only woman in my life is my mama," Conner says. "She's always there for me and never breaks my heart."

But the smell of mama's pancakes is long gone. So is the mild-mannered, mass-communicated drudgery of the course work from earlier this morning. Now it's time to sweat at the Holliman Athletic Center weight room.

The athletes are broken down into small groups by position and weight class and then assigned a coach to guide them through their exercises. *Guide* might be incorrect terminology; *forcefully persuade* is more

Conner is making the transition from quarterback to wide receiver, so there's plenty of offseason work to be done.



JOEL LOWENSTEIN FOR TSN

'There's no other time in my life when someone's going to pay me to go to school.'

accurate. Conner and his teammates are verbally assaulted to the point of infuriation and then worked until their muscles are completely broken down. Such is the nature of offseason conditioning.

Conner starts out with four sets of five hang cleans and maxes out at 153 pounds, then does four sets of back squats at 298 pounds. Up next are four sets of six bench presses, at a maximum of 210 pounds, before he finishes up with the bar press, leg curls and weighted sit-ups.

After spending more than an hour in the weight room, Conner heads to the practice field for some catching drills. He catches almost every ball that comes his way before bowing out to let some of the other receivers take more reps. The practice session is cut short because of a team meeting back at the Shira Fieldhouse, where coach Sylvester Croom emphasizes the importance of offseason conditioning.

"We are done playing well and claiming moral victories. This year is the year we start winning some ballgames," Croom bellows, "and everything you do or don't do right now will show up in that first game against South Carolina."

Croom keeps it short, and his point appears to be heard loud and clear. After a 10-minute meeting with offensive coordinator Woody McCorvey and the other wide receivers, Conner is free for the evening. Dinnertime. A welcome relief, even if it's not a meal from mama's kitchen.

—R.J. Morgan

Terrence Roberts Syracuse basketball

Shooting the rock, studying rocks

It's the first environmental geology discussion of the semester, and Terrence Roberts arrives a minute late. He walks into a full class, hunched over a bit because of doors that weren't built for power forwards, and takes one of the few empty seats in the classroom in the back right corner.

Roberts attentively takes notes, scribbling the geological jargon that the teacher's assistant records on the board. Messages on his PDA prompt him to silence the device he carries with him. Roberts, an information management technology major, is a big gadget guy. He has designed his own website and also creates computer images for an independent project.

He looks up and continues writing with a facial expression similar to the other students' in the class, remaining as interested as any 21-year-old would be when discussing the difference between rocks and minerals.

Walking out of the class, Roberts tries to catch up with the teacher's assistant. He's going to have to miss classes because of away games, and he wants to clear his situation with the instructor. While he walks toward her, a student keeping pace stares at the junior with the gawky smile of an overjoyed kid at autograph day.

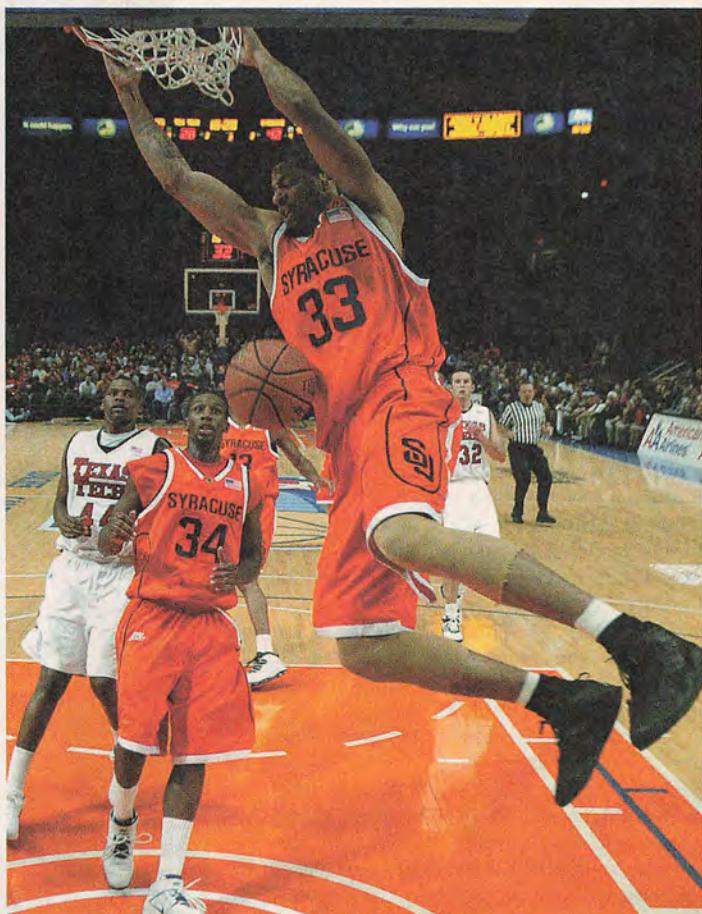
"Are you Terrence Roberts?" the admirer asks, as if there were a lot of 6-9 students strolling around in Syracuse basketball sweats and sporting 12 tattoos.

"Yeah," Roberts mumbles politely, in the tone of someone who would like a few minutes when he could go unrecognized.

"Oh, well, good luck this season," the student responds.

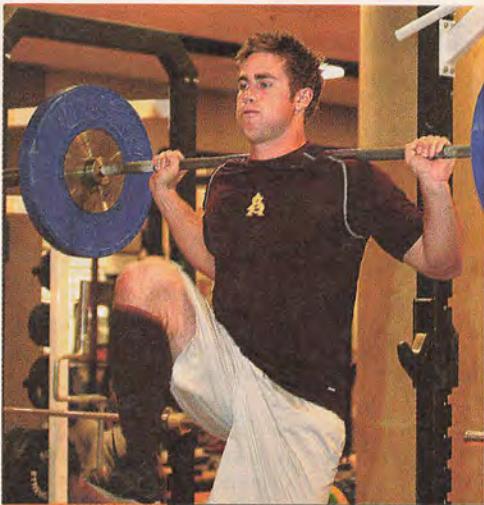
Roberts accepts the sentiment and quietly chuckles.

"You kind of get used to it." —Zach Berman



JULIE JACOBSON / AP

You think this is amazing? Try staying awake through Geology.



JEN STRAHM FOR TSN

Colin Curtis Arizona State baseball

Courage under the sun

The words inscribed inside Arizona State outfielder Colin Curtis' copy of *It's Not About the Bike: My Journey Back to Life* read: "I've been reading that we have a lot in common. Hang in there. Swing for the fences."

The words were written by seven-time Tour de France winner Lance Armstrong. Curtis, a preseason All-American, was diagnosed with testicular cancer during his freshman year of high school in 1999.

Surgery to remove the malignancy was successful, and Curtis says the long break from practices and games proved helpful in some ways.

"It made me realize how much I love playing," he says. "It made baseball and a lot of other things in life more important."

After missing half of his freshman season, he returned in time to help Issaquah (Wash.) High School win a state championship. Three years later, he was drafted by the Cincinnati Reds. But Curtis wasn't ready to pass up college and head to the pros.

Today, he is a top player on one of the top programs in the country. The promise of fame and fortune, however, hasn't gone to his head. In most ways, he's just another college junior.

During an interview in an ASU cafeteria, a reporter's questions are interrupted when Curtis blurts out, "Oh, it's flank steak day!" And he can't stop talking about EA Sports' new college baseball video game, in which he's a featured player. "It's my video game debut," a beaming Curtis says.

As for campus life, his grades are good and he's having the time of his life. And what about that blistering Arizona sun beating down on someone from Washington?

"I love Arizona," he says. "This weather is great."

Curtis works out tirelessly and is one of the most conditioned players on the team, though he would be the last to brag.

He also would be the last one to complain about his battle with cancer. Asked to describe his biggest obstacle in life, Curtis doesn't mention his illness. He'd rather talk about baseball. —Eric Johnson

Matt Every Florida golf

In Gators country, football always rules

Walking away from the 2005 U.S. Open with the best amateur score in the tournament? "I was pretty happy with the way things worked out."

Trading fashion tips and sports jokes with President Bush in the Oval Office? "He's a really solid guy. I wouldn't mind sitting back and having a couple of beers, drinking a bottle of Jack Daniel's with him."

Destroying a roommate in a meaningless video game? "You can't stop me."

If Matt Every seems a bit casual about his gaudy resume, cut Florida's prized golfer a little slack—John Madden controls his brain.

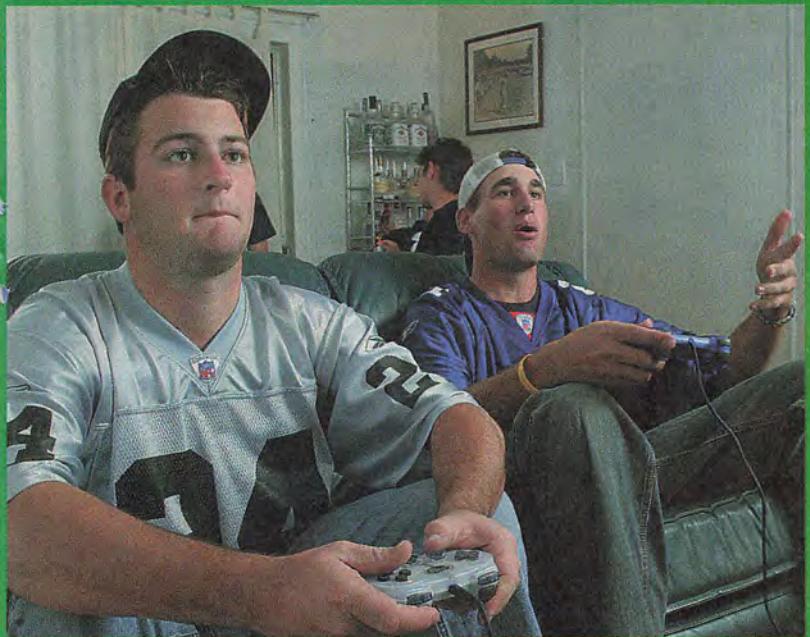
Riding a rare monthlong stretch without a golf tournament, Every, a senior, must keep his competitive juices flowing. On this day,

he already has won a race across campus during practice (never mind the 2-minute head start) and dominated teammates Will Strickler and Jessie Mudd in poker. But poker is a mere appetizer to the evening's main course, which comes complete with flying controllers and a side of smack talk—



SEAN GALLAGHER / TSN





TIM CASEY FOR TSN

When not on the golf course, Every (left) still finds plenty of ways to get his competitive fix, usually at the expense of his roommates.

Every seeks out his latest victim in Madden 2005 on PlayStation 2.

Facing Strickler's Tennessee Titans, Every's St. Louis Rams trail most of the game, until a fourth quarter fumble leads to a Marshall Faulk touchdown. That sets up a dilemma—send the game into overtime with an extra point or go for the kill?

"This is where I screw him over," Every says. "I always go for two."

Seconds later, an emphatic thud echoes across the house. Strickler's controller leaves yet another black mark on the wall.

The U.S. Open veteran never has felt prouder, boasting, "He can never stop me."

—Andrew Abramson

A more typical college life

Our bloggers have spent a lot of time showcasing athletes from their schools; we thought it'd be only fair to also showcase them. After all, they, too, know what it's like to live the college life. You can read more of their work and see which other schools are represented, at sportingnews.com/cbasketball/campuswatch.



Jonathan Wall is a senior at Texas A&M who majors in English and minors in journalism. He covers men's basketball and football for the school paper, *The Battalion*.



Justin Coons is a news and editorial journalism major at Colorado. He says his writing style is similar to Vince Young's throwing style—funky and a little bit awkward.



Daniel Novinson will graduate from Stanford in 2008 with majors in public policy and economics. Yet he wants to go into sports media. Smart career move.



R.J. Morgan, a senior majoring in secondary education at Mississippi State, has the most extensive collection of shot glasses in the entire Southeastern Conference.



Zach Berman is a sophomore at Syracuse, where he majors in journalism and political science. But he doesn't know a thing about Environmental Geology.



Eric Johnson is a junior communications major at Arizona State. He has what some people call an *obsession* with Shawn Marion; he prefers admiration.



Andrew Abramson, a Florida senior who majors in journalism, still is helping Gators fans forget about the Ron Zook era.



Steve Silver is a sophomore journalism major at Northwestern. He always picks the underdogs and does not hesitate to cry during *Rudy* or *Field of Dreams*.



We've provided a glimpse of each athlete's day. For a sunrise-to-sleep rundown—plus stories on more athletes—go to sportingnews.com/features/dayinthelife.



Kristen Kjellman Northwestern lacrosse

Getting through the day is a team effort

Eating lunch with Kristen Kjellman and eight other members of the Northwestern women's lacrosse team is as fast-paced and action-packed as standing at midfield during one of their games.

People are coming and going from the table at a dizzying pace, multiple conversations are somehow heard over the din of laughter, and no-look passes appear rehearsed as food is flung across the table.

At the middle of this organized chaos known as lunch is Kjellman, a junior midfielder who led the Wildcats to an NCAA championship last year.

Today is no different from any other day in that most of what she does involves her team. After a 2-hour practice beginning at 8 a.m., Kjellman (pronounced Chell-man) headed back to her house, where she lives with seven other teammates, to shower and change. Then, before heading to afternoon classes with more of her teammates, she has stopped for an informal team lunch in the Norris University Center. See a pattern?

It only continues. After two classes, Kjellman usually works out more before eating dinner with her teammates. If she stumbles across any free time, Kjellman usually watches television or plays board games such as Cranium or Scene It with her roommates.

When *American Idol* becomes the topic of conversation at lunch, the whole table turns to Kjellman. Apparently, her performance of "Footloose" during a road trip last year earned her the title of NU Women's Lax Idol. She doesn't want to put on a lunchtime show, however. That's something she'll save for what she refers to as her *fraternity*—because although her teammates are women, they like to have all the fun that a fraternity does. —Steve Silver

The next *American Idol*? Probably not. But Kjellman is a driving force for the reigning women's lacrosse champions.

JAY DROWNS / TSN

INSIDER

Sporting News



After Jeremy Bloom takes his high-flying act to Torino, he may parlay his athleticism into an NFL roster spot.

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INSIDER MATT HAYES

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Lesson No. 1 in Vince Young's new life: The NFL is a scary world.

Young's handlers aren't handling their business

He was the first player on the field, standing tall, smiling wide and clowning around as he always does. Now the key question: Why was he even there?

Why was Vince Young, the hottest football player on the planet, participating in a cheesy made-for-television "all-star challenge" in Miami? Why would a player who has nothing to gain and everything to lose as a top draft prospect be part of an informal workout—because that's what it was—in an environment over which he had no control?

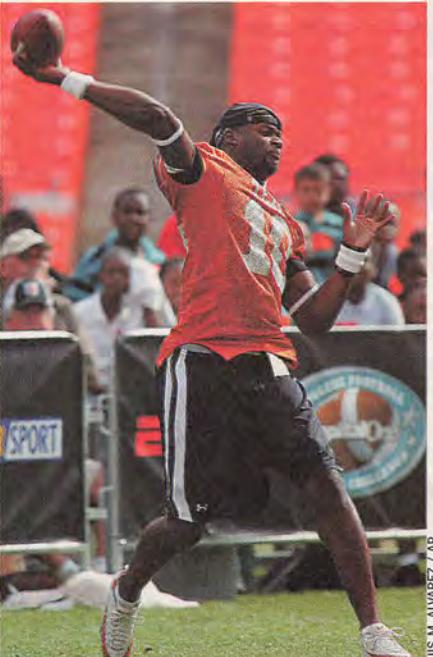
"I've been working out at home really hard, and I needed a break," Young says.

Fine. Go to the Bahamas. Go to Europe. Go anywhere but to some skills challenge that exposes weaknesses to Texans owner Bob McNair—the guy debating whether to spend millions on you—and his personnel department.

"I wouldn't have him anywhere near here," one agent said through the glare of the South Florida sun.

Meanwhile, Young's agent, Major Adams, a friend of the Young family and not as—what's a nice way to say this?—experienced as some other agents, declares, "If you have nothing to hide, why hide?"

Well, here's why: Young was set up to fail in this event. And when



LUIS M. ALVAREZ/AP

Young wasn't able to eliminate doubts about his accuracy or mechanics.

it was over, he hadn't shown nearly the accuracy of UCLA's Drew Olson or Alabama's Brodie Croyle. He looked on par with Clemson's Charlie Whitehurst—who still is recovering from shoulder surgery. There's a reason colleges have pro days, when pro scouts come to campuses to watch players work

BLOG ALERT

Oh, and please say a prayer for Florida.

Check out Tom Dienhart's blog at sportingnews.com to see why he thinks the Gators' schedule has more potential pitfalls than, well, a swamp.

out in their environment, throw to their teammates and, more than anything, perform in their comfort zone.

At one point in the skills competition, the four QBs were paired with pass catchers. Young was paired with Memphis running back DeAngelo Williams, the only nonreceiver in the group, and the two didn't connect on three of five passes.

There also was a deep throwing test in which quarterbacks were asked to throw the ball as far as they could while keeping the ball between the hash marks. Young scratched to the right on his first two attempts. Before the third throw, Adams yelled, "Aim it this way (left)." I'm not sure if he was joking or serious, but the third throw hit the right hash mark barrier.

There is too much riding on Young's future—he wants to play for his hometown Texans, who would have to give up on former No. 1 overall pick David Carr to pull the trigger on Young—to noodle around in Miami for a measly appearance fee. His management team had better tighten up and get a grip on what's best for its client.

Young says he will work out at the NFL Scouting Combine but won't lift or run. He'll follow the same plan at his pro day in late March in Austin. The goal, he says, is to focus on throwing and eliminate any doubt about his funky mechanics or accuracy.

I have no doubt about Young's ability to throw. His ability to choose a competent management team is another story. TSN



The shock of the recruiting season: five-star RB **C.J. Spiller**'s choice of Clemson. He grew up two hours from Tallahassee and always has been a Florida State fan. Two weeks before signing day, Florida, with a need at tailback, began closing fast.

Southern California, an early leader with FSU, fell off late. Spiller is the Tigers' best recruit since **Brian Dawkins** in the early 1990s. In the previous four years, Clemson hadn't landed a five-star recruit on the Rivals100.com list.

► As good as Notre Dame's top five recruiting class is, it could have been better. Irish coach **Charlie Weis** says **Mitch Mustain**, one of the nation's top quarterbacks, wanted to play for Notre Dame before signing with Arkansas. But Weis turned Mustain down because he promised committed QBs **Zach Frazer** and

Demetrius Jones he wouldn't recruit another QB. ► Syracuse coach **Greg Robinson** signed four receivers and **Andrew Robinson**, one of the top quarterbacks on the East Coast. Syracuse's quarterbacks struggled in the West Coast offense last season, and Greg Robinson says Andrew Robinson (no relation) will compete for the starting spot. Considering the combined numbers of QBs **Perry Patterson** and **Joe Fields** last

season (46.2 percent completion rate, six TDs, 14 interceptions), don't be surprised if Robinson wins the job. ► **Mike Stoops** landed another talented class at Arizona, which is increasing its talent level and could compete for the Pac-10 title in 2007. The Wildcats signed seven four- or five-star recruits, including DE **Louis Holmes**, whom USC badly wanted.

The seven recruits are defensive players. Last year's class significantly upgraded the offense, with QB **Willie Tuitama** and WR **Mike Thomas**.

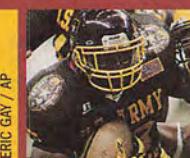
Signs of the times

Who's moving up? Who's dropping down? The future began on national signing

ACC

Best classes

- 1 Florida State
- 2 Clemson
- 3 Miami
- 4 North Carolina
- 5 Maryland



ERIC GAY / AP

BIG EAST

Best players

- 1 DB Myron Rolle, Florida State
- 2 RB C.J. Spiller, Clemson
- 3 DE Brandon Warren, Florida State
- 4 DE Ricky Sapp, Clemson
- 5 RB LeSean McCoy, Miami

- 1 Pittsburgh
- 2 Louisville
- 3 Rutgers
- 4 Syracuse
- 5 West Virginia

- 1 WR Deantwan Whitehead, Louisville
- 2 TE Nate Byham, Pittsburgh
- 3 RB Kevin Collier, Pittsburgh
- 4 OL Adam Rosner, Syracuse
- 5 WR Kenny Britt, Rutgers

BIG TEN

- 1 Penn State
- 2 Ohio State
- 3 Michigan
- 4 Michigan State
- 5 Illinois

- 1 RB Chris Wells, Ohio State
- 2 LB Brandon Graham, Michigan
- 3 DB A.J. Wallace, Penn State
- 4 DE Robert Rose, Ohio State
- 5 OL Stephen Schilling, Michigan

Underachievers

N.C. State. **Chuck Amato** once was Florida State's ace recruiter; now he's just another coach selling a middle-of-the-road team.



BOB LEVERONE / TSN

West Virginia had a limited number of scholarships available, but it still failed to land a marquee defensive back—a serious need. The karma from its **Sugar Bowl** victory should have helped more.

Iowa. Was last year's top 10 class an aberration? Annual rumors about coach Kirk Ferentz's going to the NFL don't help.



PAUL NISLEY / TSN

Overachievers

For a guy who annually has to fend off rumors about his job security, Clemson's **Tommy Bowden** is one hell of a recruiter.



BOB LEVERONE / TSN



JEFF GENTNER / THE CHARLESTON GAZETTE

Syracuse is coming off a one-win season but still landed what will go down as a program-defining class. The staff filled needs everywhere, specifically with eight signees on the offensive line.

Illinois. **Ron Zook** always has been able to recruit, but to this outpost? After that awful season? You can build a program around quarterback Isiah Williams.



National perspective



JOCELYN WILLIAMS / AKRON BEACON JOURNAL / AP

Top players

- 1 WR Percy Harvin, Florida. He's not the next Reggie Bush. He's closer to Ted Ginn or Derrick Williams, though Harvin is physically ready for a full college football season.
- 2 DT Gerald McCoy, Oklahoma. Get ready for the Tommie Harris comparisons. McCoy is a big, thick, quick run stuffer with a gregarious personality—when making his official announcement, he put on an OU hat and flashed a horns-down sign.
- 3 QB Matthew Stafford, Georgia. Stafford has a live arm and is comfortable under center or in the shotgun, which makes him a perfect fit for coach Mark Richt's offense. Stafford already is enrolled and will participate in spring practice.
- 4 DB Myron Rolle, Florida State. Get this: Rolle's last "B" came in the ninth grade. The Seminoles' undisciplined secondary can use immediate help.
- 5 RB Chris Wells, Ohio State. He keeps getting called "Maurice Clarett without the baggage." Two things: 1) Forget any association with Clarett; 2) how does Wells play ahead of budding star Antonio Pittman?

day—the most important date on the offseason calendar *By Matt Hayes*

BIG 12

- 1 Texas
- 2 Oklahoma
- 3 Oklahoma State
- 4 Nebraska
- 5 Texas A&M



- 1 DT Gerald McCoy, Oklahoma
- 2 LB Sergio Kindle, Texas
- 3 DE Eddie Jones, Texas
- 4 RB Michael Goodson, Texas A&M
- 5 QB Jevan Snead, Texas

PAC-10

- 1 Southern California
- 2 California
- 3 UCLA
- 4 Arizona
- 5 Arizona State

- 1 LB Allen Bradford, USC
- 2 WR Vidal Hazelton, USC
- 3 DE Louis Holmes, Arizona
- 4 DT Derrick Hill, California
- 5 RB Stafon Johnson, USC

SEC

- 1 Florida
- 2 Georgia
- 3 LSU
- 4 Alabama
- 5 Auburn



- 1 WR Percy Harvin, Florida
- 2 QB Matthew Stafford, Georgia
- 3 OT Andre Smith, Alabama
- 4 QB Mitch Mustain, Arkansas
- 5 DT Al Woods, LSU

OTHERS

- 1 Notre Dame
- 2 Utah
- 3 Southern Miss
- 4 TCU
- 5 UAB

- 1 OL Sam Young, Notre Dame
- 2 RB James Aldridge, Notre Dame
- 3 QB Demetrius Jones, Notre Dame
- 4 DT Joseph Faifili, Utah
- 5 TE Konrad Reuland, Notre Dame

MICHAEL McNAMARA / TSN

Who here thinks **Bill Callahan** has to win now? Nebraska has eight junior college signees. A JC fix isn't a long-term solution when rebuilding a program.



Oklahoma State. We heard about Mike Gundy's recruiting prowess; now we see it firsthand. The 'Pokes beat big dog Oklahoma for a couple of elite players.

Oregon failed to back up its stellar 2004 and '05 classes—despite a 10-victory season.



Better get Arizona now, everyone. **Mike Stoops** is one more top 20 class from competing for the Pac-10 title.

Phillip Fulmer followed his first losing season at Tennessee with his lowest-rated recruiting class. Losing TE Michael Goggans (Auburn) and LBs Kelvin Sheppard and Perry Riley (LSU) to league rivals made it worse.

Middle Tennessee. First-year coach **Rick Stockstill** had limited scholarships available, but his recruiting reputation and contacts didn't make near the impact expected.

BOB LEVERONE / TSN



How can a program this devoid of momentum pull off a top 40 class? Kentucky concentrated on the interior lines, including a steal in DT Corey Peters, whom Michigan and Ohio State wanted badly.

Skip Holtz quickly is changing the losing culture at East Carolina. The Pirates landed two key wide receivers, Melvin Patterson and Dwayne Harris, who could play for a number of BCS schools.



KAREN KRAFT / THE DAILY JOURNAL / AP



Wideout Percy Harvin helped the Gators ring in the nation's second-best class.

Top classes

1 Southern California. The Trojans closed fast and loaded up on skill players. Coach Pete Carroll should be embarrassed by how easy he makes this look.

2 Florida. Coach Urban Meyer isn't giving up on his spread option offense, having recruited specifically for the scheme with dual-threat quarterback Tim Tebow and the best receivers in the nation.

3 Florida State. Death, taxes, a top five FSU recruiting class. Yet, the Seminoles have lost 20 games since the start of the 2001 season. Could it be c-c-c-c-coaching?

4 Notre Dame. This is why Charlie Weis makes so much dough: nine wins, a BCS bowl, a top five recruiting class, tons of good karma. All in a span of 11 months.

5 Texas. More than 80 percent of the class already had committed before the Longhorns' national championship. Translation: 2007 will be a monster recruiting year.

GARY C. KNAPP / AP

INSIDER DAN POMPEI

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The defense that's becoming the rage in the NFL is proving that sometimes the simplest answers are the best ones.

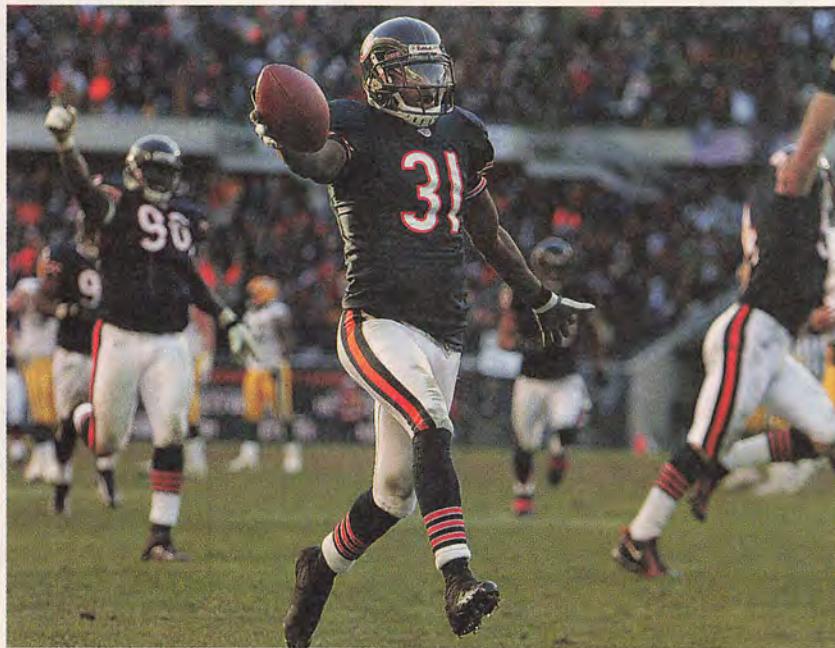
The Dungy 'D' can be done dirt cheap

This is the way rabbits take over a neighborhood. First you see one, then you see five. Next thing you know they are everywhere and you can't protect your vegetables.

Three of the most effective defensive teams in the NFL this season—the Bears, Colts and Bucs—used “Dungy Defenses.” Three more teams—the Vikings, Lions and Bills—will employ Dungy’s principles next season.

The Vikings might not be running the scheme if not for the success the Bears had with it. New Minnesota coach Brad Childress says he believes running the Dungy Defense will be particularly beneficial in the NFC North, where the Bears are kings. “What better way to prepare for it than practice against it every day?” Childress says.

And Childress believes running the Dungy Defense should be as problematic for opposing offenses as it will be beneficial for the Vikings’ offense. Childress is accustomed to game-planning against the Dungy “D,” having faced a version of the scheme 11 times in the past six seasons. “It does give you some problems,” he says. “It’s disruptive on the



JEFF ROBERSON / AP

Vasher is an example of how the right 'D' can turn a midround pick into a Pro Bowl pick.

outside routes with all the two-deep (coverage) they play.”

The Dungy Defense is being duplicated mostly because the teams that have used it have had success with it. It helps that the scheme is easy to learn. Rookies can acclimate faster (see Bears safety Chris Harris). Veterans can step in quickly (see Colts defensive tackle Corey Simon). “It’s simple,” Lions president Matt

Millen says. “If it’s done right, you clean up all the gray area. You get everything defined so there are fewer questions for guys to answer. They know where they fit. They know what their responsibilities are.”

The Bears play eight-man fronts on running downs. They drop into cover 2 on passing downs. They run only five coverages from their base

it’s the timing. Coordinator Ron Rivera makes them count.

The streamlined approach has resulted in rapid growth in the two years coach Lovie Smith has been in charge of the Bears. “Our inventory as a defensive unit is small enough to where we are able to practice our base stuff every week,” linebackers coach Bob Babich says. “And every week, no matter who we’re playing, we’re able to get better at those things.” The more comfortable the Bears are with their responsibilities, the faster they play.

Players warm to the scheme because it allows them to cut it loose with a minimal amount of deliberation. “You get enthusiasm, you get people flying to the ball, those kinds of things,” Colts president Bill Polian says.

And that, in Millen’s mind, is



What's a Dungy Defense?

Named for Colts coach **Tony Dungy**, the Dungy Defense is known for two basic principles.

The first is the cover 2, a zone coverage in which both safeties are responsible for a deep half of the field. But no team plays just one style of coverage. Even the teams that use the cover 2 probably only rely on it a little more than half the time.

The second involves the four-man front. Defensive linemen are responsible for just one gap between offensive linemen, and they are taught to charge straight upfield rather than read and react. The line also features a tackle who plays a 3 technique in which he lines up on the outside shoulder of the guard in front of him.

INSIDE DISH

If QB **Daunte Culpepper** isn't with the Vikings next season, it won't be because the team doesn't want him. Coach **Brad Childress** wants Culpepper back, and the team is intent on keeping him. Childress has liked Culpepper since he saw him work out for the Eagles when Culpepper was coming out of Central Florida in 1999. Childress ranked Culpepper as the second-best quarterback in that draft, ahead of **Tim Couch**, **Akili Smith** and **Cade McNown** but behind **Donovan McNabb**. Now Childress wants to see whether he can help Culpepper become more consistent. The only way Culpepper will not be in Minnesota is if Culpepper doesn't want to be there. ➤ **Delta**



James

KEVIN TANAKA FOR TSN

O'Neal may be in Honolulu for the Pro Bowl this week, but he wasn't the Bengals' most consistent cornerback this season. **Tory James** was. O'Neal is good—he tied for the league lead with 10 interceptions. But Bengals coaches thought James played better on an every-down basis. Opponents threw more passes at O'Neal. In fact, he could have had 15 interceptions but had five drops. ➤ It's little wonder **Mike Mularkey** resigned as coach of the Bills, given owner **Ralph Wilson**'s indication that he plans to be more involved in running the team. Wilson, according to former Bills employees, already is way too involved.



It's Culpepper's call whether he wants to stay in the Twin Cities. The Vikings aren't trying to run him off.

During games, he sends messages to the coaching box complaining about calls and pointing out trends. Wilson also is known to pester the head coach and general manager, taking up hours and hours of their workweeks with phone calls. ➤ The Broncos have legitimate interest in Dolphins RB **Ricky Williams** even though **Mike Anderson** and **Tatum Bell** both played well last season. The thinking is coach **Mike Shanahan** would rather have one great back carry the load than divvy it up among multiple backs. And Shanahan always has thought Williams would be a great fit in the Broncos' offense. ➤ The Browns need some pass-rushing help and have some cash and cap space to find it. The problem is there aren't many pass rushers available. One player who could be a good match for Cleveland is 49ers OLB **Julian Peterson**, who is about to become a free agent. He could be a nice fit in coach **Romeo**

Crennel's 3-4 defense, and Peterson should be a much better player in 2006 than he was in 2005, when he still showed the aftereffects of an Achilles' tendon injury. ➤ The Titans are thrilled CB **Pacman Jones** has made a commitment to be part of the offseason workout program. Jones needs guidance in three areas: conditioning, technique and off-the-field maturity. The team will try to take Jones back to square one. He missed all of training camp, and it showed. Late in the season, Jones appeared worn out. Coaches also will stress that he must improve his tackling. ➤ The generally accepted wisdom is teams improve at defending the run by practicing hitting and tackling. But the Bears credit their improved run defense to their walkthrough practices, of all things. They go through an unusually detailed and tedious walkthrough three times a week. In the course of 30 minutes, the Bears run up to 50 plays against every rushing front they anticipate seeing. The first rep for each play is for the benefit of defensive linemen. The second rep is for linebackers and defensive backs.

speed reads

Peyton Manning is an outstanding choice for the Walter Payton Man of the Year Award. Nobody represents the NFL better, on and off the field, than the Colts quarterback.

NFL owners need to get their act together quickly on the collective bargaining agreement. The league is headed down a slippery path in its relationship with the NFL Players Association, and there is much to lose.

Nobody belongs in the Pro Football Hall of Fame more than Reggie White. He was the most dominant player of his era. I never have seen a player who approached White's power. It's a shame he is not around to enjoy the honor he earned.

Something tells me Terrell Owens is going to be getting some votes for Comeback Player of the Year next January.

the key. "It's not what you're doing; it's how you're doing it," he says. "What Tampa has created success with is not the coverage. It's not the concept. It's that they get everybody busting their (butts) to get where they have to go. That's the thing."

Finding players to fit a Dungy Defense can be easy, but the Vikings, Lions and Bills likely will be in a transition phase next season. They'll probably need to weed out—or slim down—some of their overuffed linemen and find faster linebackers.

Corners for man-to-man

schemes can be impossible to find, but corners for this scheme are as easy to come by as junk mail. They don't have to have imposing size, top speed or outstanding man-to-man coverage skills. All they need are instinct, discipline and toughness. The Bears' Nathan Vasher is a perfect example of a corner who might not fare well in some schemes, but he made the Pro Bowl playing for Smith.

The Dungy Defense isn't for everybody. But if it's run correctly, it sure can be hard on opponents' vegetables.

TSN

NFL INSIDE THE AFC

The **JETS** continued their youth movement on the coaching staff by hiring former Chargers quarterbacks coach **Brian Schottenheimer**, 32, as offensive coordinator. It's a huge gamble—he hasn't called plays on any level. Look for Schottenheimer to run a balanced offense similar to the Chargers' scheme, with heavy emphasis on play-action passing. ... **TITANS** DT **Albert Haynesworth** did not make a consistent impact in 2005



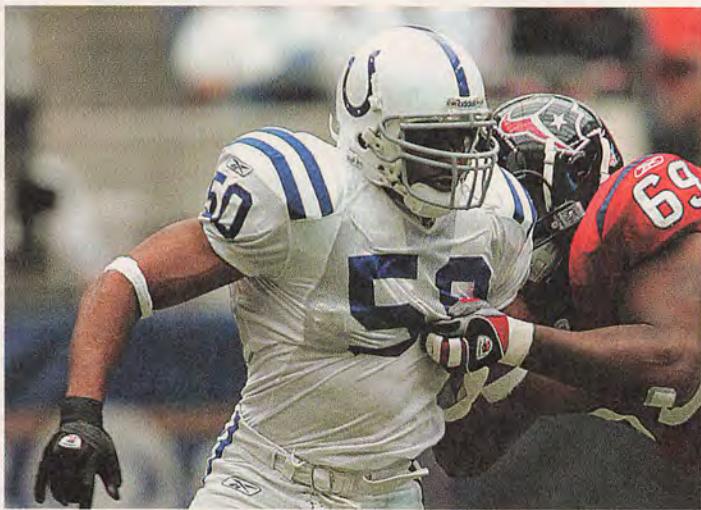
ALBERT DICKSON / TSN

Haynesworth

because injuries set him back and his technique suffered. Haynesworth (6-6, 320) is strong, but he must have good technique to be effective because he tends to play too high. ... The **BROWNS** probably will look for linebacker help in the early rounds of the draft and in the free-agent market, but if **Nick Speegle** continues to develop, he could crack the rotation at outside linebacker. A sixth-round pick in 2005, Speegle (6-6, 250) has a good mix of size, athleticism

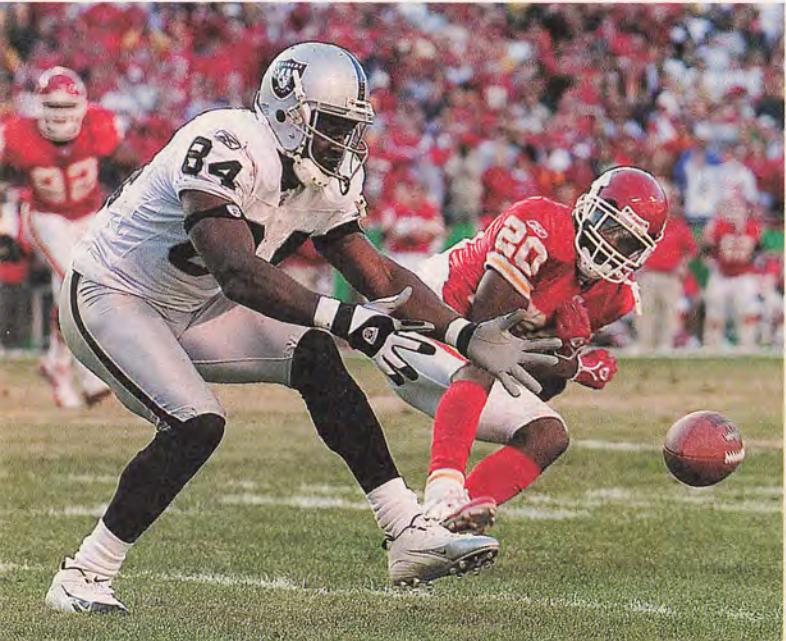
and intelligence, and he played well on special teams this season. ... Expect CB **Patrick Body** to get a chance to replace **Tory James** in the **BENGALS'** lineup. Body and James are the same size (6-2, 190), and each is effective in press coverage. Body isn't as fluid, but his superior speed could give him an edge. ... **BRONCOS** CB **Darrent Williams** didn't have the same burst after tearing a groin muscle in mid-December, but he likely will start next season opposite **Champ Bailey**. Williams breaks more quickly and has more big-play ability than **Domonique Foxworth**, his primary competition for the spot. ... The **COLTS** won't break the bank to re-sign free-agent OLB **David Thornton**,

but losing him would be significant because he's a steady contributor and the team doesn't have anybody ready to



JAMES NIELSEN FOR TSN

If Thornton leaves, the Colts will be scrambling to replace him.



ALBERT DICKSON / TSN

In order to become an elite receiver, Porter must latch on to a consistent approach—and never let go.

Not enough touches to go around

The Dolphins are concerned about how long RBs **Ricky Williams** and **Ronnie Brown** will be happy splitting carries. It worked well last season, when Brown was adjusting to the NFL, but at some point, one player needs to be the primary ballcarrier. There is increasing curiosity around the league about what it would cost to acquire Williams, who probably would welcome a trade because it would give him a chance to get a new contract.



JOHN CORDES FOR TSN

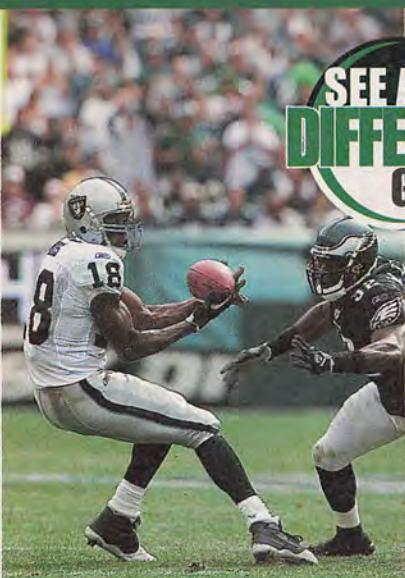
Williams

replace him. Thornton is the type of athletic linebacker who fits well in the team's scheme. Backups **Gilbert Gardner** and **Tyuan Hagler** have little experience. ... Signing LG **Brian Waters** to a long-term contract was a smart move by the **CHIEFS**. Waters, 28, is a two-time Pro Bowl selection who can anchor the line for years. He is strong at the point of attack and has the speed to make downfield blocks. ... NT **Seth Payne** had a key role in the **TEXANS'** 3-4 defense, but his job will change next season if the team moves to a 4-3. Considering Payne produced four sacks in 2005—a solid number for a nose tackle—he will have a good shot at starting at tackle. But if DE **Gary Walker** is retained and moved inside, Payne could become a backup. ... One way **STEELERS** LT **Marvel Smith** prepares for speed rushers is by working against SS **Troy Polamalu** after practice. Polamalu lines up in a three-point stance and tries to use his speed to get around Smith, which forces Smith to move and get good position on the perimeter. ... The **RAIDERS** still are

FOCUS: Something to prove

Colts OLB **Gilbert Gardner**, a third-round pick in 2004, has the size (6-1, 228) and athleticism to be effective in coordinator **Ron Meeks'** defense, but injuries have kept him from fulfilling expectations. Gardner must have a solid offseason, advance in the defensive system and be ready to compete for a starting job when training camp starts. The team has several young players at linebacker, so if Gardner is unable to take a huge step heading into his third season, the team might consider him expendable. ... Some medical experts believe Jets QB **Chad Pennington**, coming off his second shoulder surgery in a year, never will regain all of his arm strength; some even think he won't play again. Pennington is known as a hard worker, and he's motivated to prove the skeptics wrong. His plan is to start throwing again in March. If he's not throwing by the end of March—which will be almost six months after his surgery—it will be an ominous sign. ... Jaguars WR **Matt Jones**, the team's No. 1 pick in 2005, needs to show more intensity and become much more consistent after showing flashes of excellence as a rookie. The former college quarterback made a smoother than expected transition to receiver in the NFL and had five touchdown catches, but Jones has plenty of room for improvement. He doesn't run crisp routes, he avoids





SEE A DIFFERENT GAME

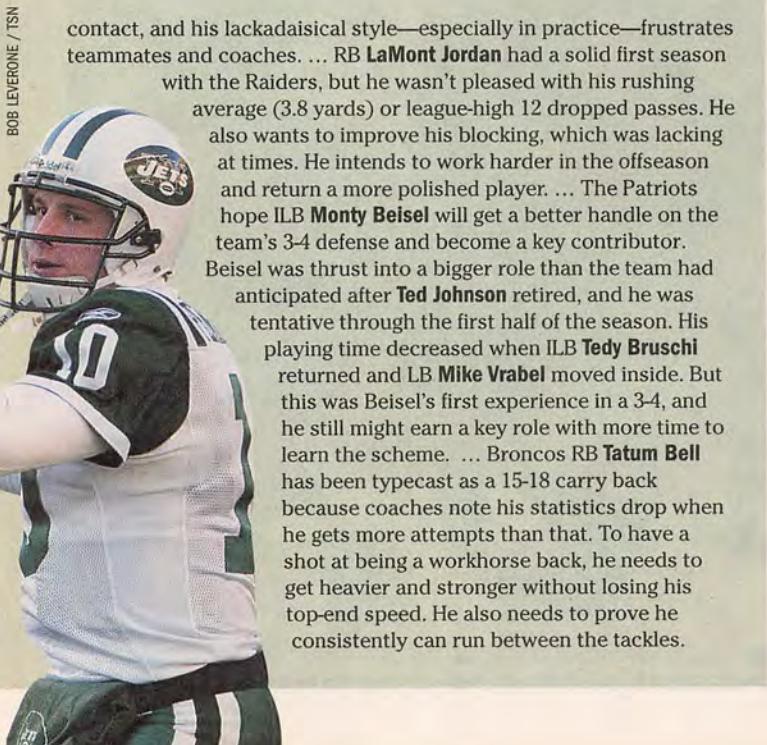
Some criticized the Raiders for not throwing enough deep passes to WR **Randy Moss** in 2005. However, the team thinks it should have thrown Moss more intermediate passes. Look for the team to make that adjustment next season. It would allow him to take advantage of soft coverage and give him a chance to create big plays with his superb open-field ability. That approach also likely would free Moss more often on deep routes.

BOB LEVERONE / TSN

waiting for a breakout season from WR **Jerry Porter**. He tends to start slowly and get hot in the middle of the season. For Porter to be anything more than a No. 2 receiver, he needs to figure out what led him to succeed in his best games and use that approach every week. ... With QB **Doug Flutie**, 43, likely to retire, the **PATRIOTS** probably will be looking for a backup quarterback. The team prefers its No. 2 quarterback to have starting experience, so expect the Patriots to sign a free agent. ... Look for the **BILLS** to re-sign DE **Ryan Denney**, who has improved his pass-rushing skills and plays well against the run. Denney was the team's only backup at end in 2005, and losing him would create a serious depth problem. ... The **RAVENS** shouldn't give up on LG **Edwin Muitalo** despite a subpar season. He wasn't in good shape at the start of 2005, but if he improves his

conditioning, Muitalo could re-establish himself as one of the best run blockers in the league. ... **DOLPHINS** RT **Vernon Carey**, a 2004 first-round pick, remains a question mark. Carey has good lateral quickness, but he doesn't take care of his body. He won't have the team's trust until he proves he can stay in shape. ... The **JAGUARS** are high on second-year RB **Alvin Pearman**, who has good quickness and terrific receiving skills, which make him a perfect fit as a third-down back. However, he fumbled too much in 2005. He must correct that problem to hang on to the job. ... **CHARGERS** RT **Shane Olivea** was slowed by nagging injuries in 2005 and was beaten too often in critical situations. The team will draft a tackle to be the eventual replacement for LT **Roman Oben**, 33. But if Oben stays healthy, that player could be given a chance to replace Olivea on the right side.

contact, and his lackadaisical style—especially in practice—frustrates teammates and coaches. ... RB **LaMont Jordan** had a solid first season with the Raiders, but he wasn't pleased with his rushing average (3.8 yards) or league-high 12 dropped passes. He also wants to improve his blocking, which was lacking at times. He intends to work harder in the offseason and return a more polished player. ... The Patriots hope ILB **Monty Beisel** will get a better handle on the team's 3-4 defense and become a key contributor. Beisel was thrust into a bigger role than the team had anticipated after **Ted Johnson** retired, and he was tentative through the first half of the season. His playing time decreased when ILB **Tedy Bruschi** returned and LB **Mike Vrabel** moved inside. But this was Beisel's first experience in a 3-4, and he still might earn a key role with more time to learn the scheme. ... Broncos RB **Tatum Bell** has been typecast as a 15-18 carry back because coaches note his statistics drop when he gets more attempts than that. To have a shot at being a workhorse back, he needs to get heavier and stronger without losing his top-end speed. He also needs to prove he consistently can run between the tackles.

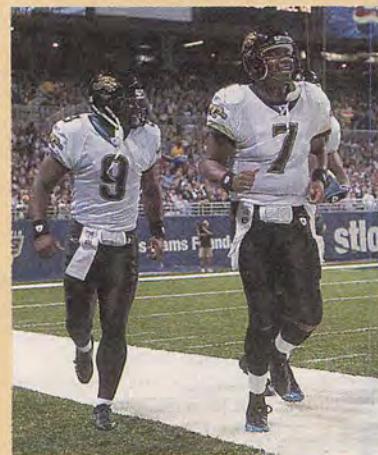


Don't bother picking up the phone

The Jaguars aren't likely to trade backup QB **David Garrard**, no matter how many teams ask about him. Garrard signed an extension last spring, and his value was displayed when the team went 4-1 while **Byron Leftwich** (ankle) was injured.

Garrard doesn't have as powerful an arm as Leftwich, but it's good enough. Garrard also has superior mobility and doesn't make many mistakes. Another reason he probably won't be moved: Leftwich hasn't proved he can stay healthy for an entire season.

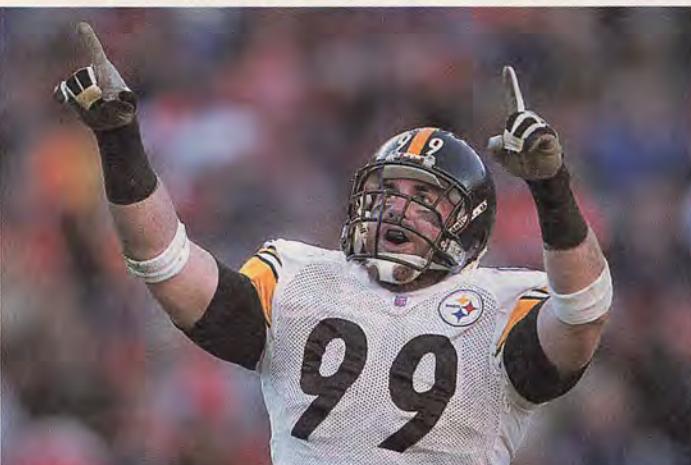
The Jags will keep paying the premiums for Garrard (9), their insurance policy for the often-injured Leftwich.



ALBERT DICKSON / TSN

OFFSEASON GAME PLAN

The Steelers would like to re-sign WR **Antwaan Randle El**, one of several key free agents, but won't overspend to keep him. He doesn't have great receiving totals, but his ability as a punt returner escalates his value. **Cedrick Wilson** would be an adequate replacement as the No. 2 receiver, but Randle El would not be easily replaced on punt returns. CB **Ricardo Colclough** would get the first chance to win the job, but the team might try to find a punt returner in the draft who also could be the No. 3 or 4 receiver. If free-agent FS **Chris Hope** leaves, veteran **Mike Logan** probably will be the first option to replace him. Logan, 31, has had injury problems, so the team would want to add depth, probably in the draft. The team also could focus on defensive end, where **Kimo von Oelhoffen**, 35, and backup **Brett Keisel** are free agents. Each is a good bet to re-sign, but Keisel, a rising player with good size and range, could attract interest from other teams. **Tommy Maddox** probably will be released, so look for the Steelers to add a new No. 3 quarterback in the fifth or sixth round of the draft.



BOB LEVERONE / TSN

Keisel's potential could attract interest in the free-agent market.

CORRESPONDENTS: Baltimore, Mike Preston; Buffalo, Allen Wilson; Cincinnati, Chick Ludwig; Cleveland, Steve Doerschuk; Denver, Lee Rasizer; Houston, Megan Manfull; Indianapolis, Mike Chappell; Jacksonville, Bart Hubbuch; Kansas City, Adam Teicher; Miami, Jason Cole; New England, Tom Curran; New York, Rich Cimini; Oakland, Steve Corkran; Pittsburgh, Gerry Dulac; San Diego, Kevin Acee; Tennessee, Jim Wyatt.

NFL INSIDE THE NFC



ALBERT DICKSON / TSN

Jones has the big-play skill to add juice to the Lions' passing game.

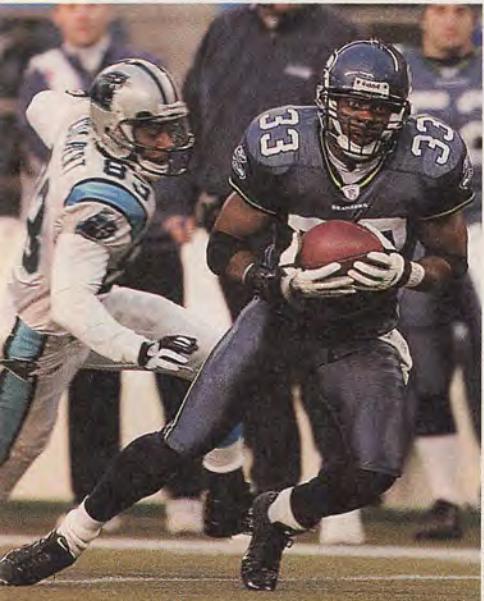
RB Kevin Jones should benefit from the increased emphasis the **LIONS** will place on small-group work in practice. Instead of working extra with Jones on his pass-protection deficiencies this season, coaches replaced him on third down. But Jones could greater exploit his big-play ability in passing situations. He has the strength and desire to be a good blocker,



OFFSEASON GAME PLAN

The Seahawks would like to add a speedy pass rusher, a fast young wide receiver and defensive depth at safety, tackle and linebacker. But the Seahawks' moves on the free-agent market and in the draft largely will depend on how they handle re-signing their own free agents. **RB Shaun Alexander** supposedly is set to go to the highest bidder, but the club plans to make a

push to retain him; there aren't many attractive alternatives, and Alexander's backup, **Maurice Morris**, also is a free agent. If a long-term deal can't be reached with **LG Steve Hutchinson**, the club could use its franchise tag on him. Even if **WR Joe Jurevicius** is re-signed, the club will look to add a receiver in the draft. Safety also is a concern because **Ken Hamlin**'s future is uncertain as a result of his head injury. **FS Marquand Manuel**, another free agent, performed better than expected as Hamlin's replacement, but his move to the starting lineup weakened the special teams and left the defense without a proven backup safety.



ROBERT SEALE / TSN

but he has poor technique and often lunges at blitzers. ... The **PANTHERS'** **Travelle Wharton** was decent in his first season at left tackle, but he needs to improve his footwork and do a better job of forcing speed rushers outside. ... The **SEAHAWKS** have not given up on **WR Peter Warrick**; they think he started rounding into form near the end of the season and would like to re-sign him. The organization attributed many of his struggles to the lingering effects of knee surgery a couple years ago. Warrick's quickness, explosiveness and sure hands seem like a perfect fit for the West Coast offense. ... If the **VIKINGS** don't re-sign **Koren Robinson**, they will lack a game-breaking receiver. **Nate Burleson** and **Travis Taylor** are accomplished slot receivers who have great hands, but neither is a consistent deep threat.

WR Troy Williamson might not be able to be counted on to fill that big-play role yet. ... The **SAINTS** would love for **RG Montrae Holland** to continue to develop as he did in 2005 and lock down a starting job.

Holland, 26, is a powerful run blocker and might have been the team's most consistent offensive lineman this season. ... **GIANTS** **DE Justin Tuck** was impressive as a speed rusher and surprisingly solid against the run as a rookie. He'll continue to benefit from working with **LE Michael**



JAY DROWNS / TSN

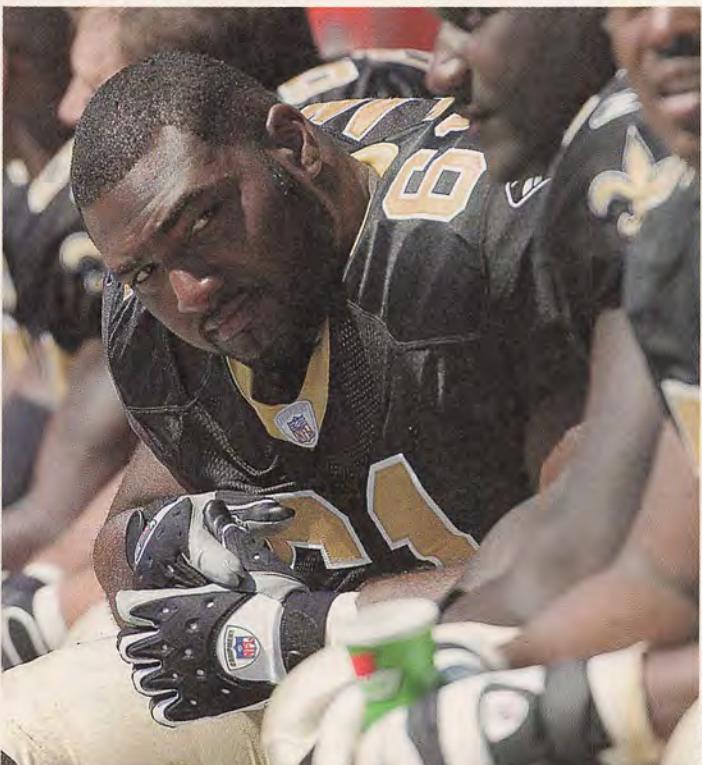
Look for Green to make a run at a starting job next season.

Loser has to buy lunch

Eric Green is expected to push veteran **David Macklin** for the Cardinals' starting right cornerback job next season. Green showed flashes of ability as a rookie this season, but he was hampered by nagging injuries and must improve his strength and endurance. Macklin is tough and competitive, but Green is slightly taller and more athletic. The player who loses out will fill the nickel back spot, which will give the club more depth than it has had at that position in several seasons.

Strahan. ... Re-signing **DT Chris Hovan** will be a top priority for the **BUCCANEERS** because **DT Anthony Bryant** isn't ready to play regularly. The team loves Bryant's size (6-3, 337) and power, but he does a poor job of shedding blockers, lacks burst and projects as a situational run stopper. ... Part of the reason the **COWBOYS** defense struggled to produce impact plays is coordinator **Mike Zimmer** rarely ran stunts and blitzed **OLB DeMarcus Ware**, a pass-rushing ace, only about 50 percent

of the time. Coach **Bill Parcells** doesn't like blitzing because it creates big-play opportunities for opponents, but it may be necessary to bring more heat next season. ... **C Jeremy Newberry** gives the **49ERS** a tough, physical presence and matches up well against interior defenders. He fought through injuries this season to play in 10 games before landing on injured reserve. Newberry's return will free his replacement, **Eric Heitmann**, to move back to guard or become the top reserve



BOB LEVERONE / TSN

Don't expect to see Holland's butt warming the bench much next season.



Newberry

JOHN CORDES FOR TSN

at guard and center. ... **PACKERS** DE **Mike Montgomery** doesn't have the explosiveness of RE **Kabeer Gbaja-Biamila** but is more stout in the running game and would be an ideal complement to Gbaja-Biamila next season. ... DTs **Brian Howard** and **Jeremy Calahan** should have a shot at moving up the **RAMS'** depth chart next season. Howard, 24, is a hard worker but needs to improve his strength. Calahan, 22, is

BOOM OR BUST

This time last year, **Michael Clayton** was coming off a record-setting rookie season and looked like the real deal. Now the Buccaneers aren't so sure about him. Although injuries played a large role in his sophomore slump, Clayton didn't display the same work ethic and passion for the game he showed as a rookie. He also lost his reputation for being a surehanded receiver who always finds a way to gain separation from defenders. Clayton doesn't have great speed, so he has to be a precise route runner. He does a good job of gaining yards after the catch but must be more willing to take what defenses give him. If Clayton regains his concentration, he should regain his first-year form.



BOB LEVERONE / TSN

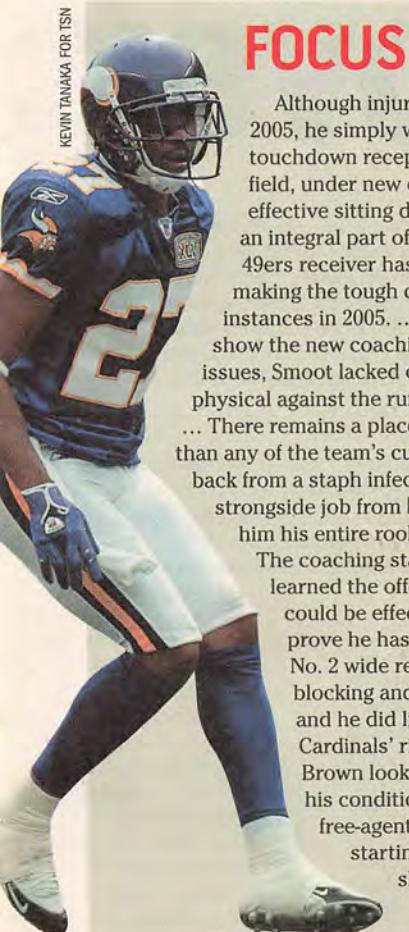
undersized (6-2, 290) but gets a good inside push. ... The **CARDINALS** were pleased by the progress of TEs **Eric Edwards** and **Adam Bergen** this season. As the team's pass protection improved, the tight ends were used more as receivers, and Edwards and Bergen proved adept in that capacity. They'll focus on becoming better blockers this offseason.

... **Cedric Killings** struggled with nagging injuries this season but remains a solid third defensive tackle for the **REDSKINS**. Killings plays with a high motor and uses his hands and leverage well. ... The **FALCONS** need to show more faith in MLB **Ed Hartwell**, who is recovering well from an Achilles' tendon injury that cost him much of the season. Because coordinator **Ed Donatell** relies so much on nickel coverage schemes, Hartwell wasn't given enough chances to make big plays when he was in the lineup. ... DTs **Hollis Thomas**, **Sam Rayburn** and **Darwin Walker** all are battling for jobs with the **EAGLES**. Thomas has become a one-dimensional run stopper. Rayburn and Walker are coming off disappointing seasons. ... **BEARS** OT **Qasim Mitchell** needs a strong showing in NFL Europe to help his stock. Mitchell has a strong upper body and excellent reach, but he has been sloppy when given the chance to play and needs to improve his work ethic.

FOCUS: Something to prove

Although injury problems were a big factor in Packers TE **Bubba Franks'** down year in 2005, he simply wasn't used much. Once a big red zone threat, Franks had only one touchdown reception. The tight end will play a bigger role, particularly in stretching the field, under new coach **Mike McCarthy**. That has never been Franks' strength, but he can be effective sitting down in zones and running short hook patterns. Those routes will become an integral part of the offense as the team returns to a more traditional West Coast look. ... No 49ers receiver has better hands than **Brandon Lloyd**, but coaches want him to improve at making the tough catch going across the middle. Lloyd seemed to shy from contact in such instances in 2005. ... After a disastrous first season with the team, Vikings CB **Fred Smoot** must show the new coaching staff he's serious about returning to form. In addition to his off-field issues, Smoot lacked consistency on the field and struggled to cover No. 1 receivers. He isn't very physical against the run, so if he doesn't improve in coverage, it will be hard to justify starting him. ... There remains a place in the Seahawks' defense for OLB **Jamie Sharper** (6-3, 240), who is bigger than any of the team's current starting linebackers and provides strong leadership. But he's coming back from a staph infection that landed him on I.R. and will have to work hard to reclaim the strongside job from **D.D. Lewis**, who filled in well for Sharper. ... Even before a foot injury cost him his entire rookie season, Panthers RB **Eric Shelton** was a disappointment in training camp.

The coaching staff wants Shelton to play a big role next season, but he must prove he has learned the offense and can handle his blocking assignments. He's a big, physical back and could be effective as a short-yardage and goal-line runner. ... **David Patten** not only must prove he has recovered from a knee injury, he also has to prove he can be the Redskins' No. 2 wide receiver. Patten was praised this season for his work ethic, downfield blocking and reliable hands. But his production wasn't equal to the contract he signed, and he did little to open up the offense. ... If **Elton Brown** steps up and seizes the Cardinals' right guard job, the line will be dramatically better next season. As a rookie, Brown looked overmatched at times, especially in pass protection. He must improve his conditioning and strength. ... Lions CB **Fernando Bryant** has yet to live up to the free-agent contract he signed two years ago and must regain his swagger to keep his starting job—and his roster spot. Bryant has decent speed and good coverage skills but seems to lack confidence in one-on-one situations.



KEVIN TANAKA FOR TSN

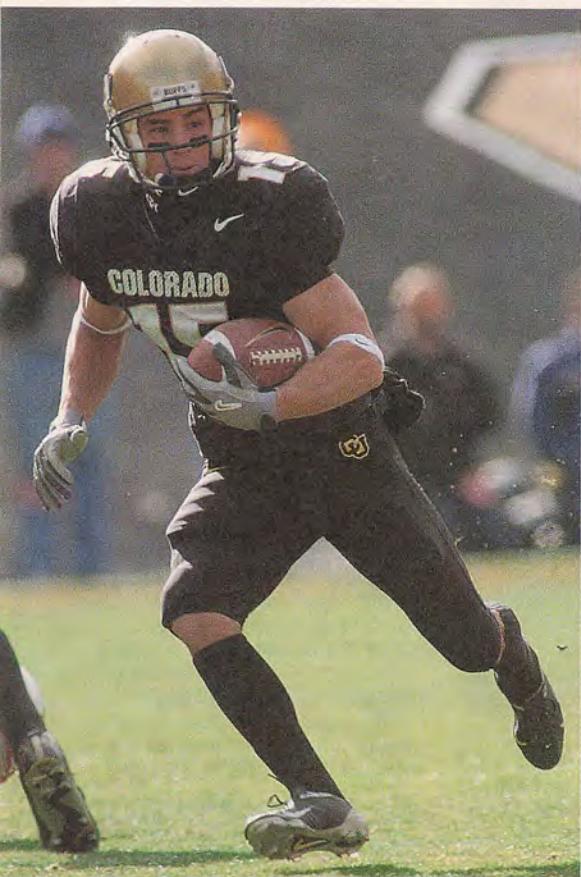


BOB LEVERONE / TSN

Cover 'em, Cowboy

The Cowboys' **Keith Davis** must prove he can be the same type of playmaker on defense that he is on special teams if he wants to keep his starting job. As the free safety playing alongside run-stopping SS **Roy Williams**, Davis must do a better job in coverage; the team needs him to be a ballhawk and create turnovers. Davis made significant improvement in 2005 but still gets too emotional at times, which causes him to lose focus and gives opponents opportunities to make big plays.

CORRESPONDENTS: Arizona, Kent Somers; Atlanta, George Henry; Carolina, Pat Yasinskas; Chicago, Brad Biggs; Dallas, Jean-Jacques Taylor; Detroit, Tom Kowalski; Green Bay, Tom Silverstein; Minnesota, Kevin Seifert; New Orleans, Mike Triplett; New York, Ralph Vacchiano; Philadelphia, Mark Eckel; St. Louis, Jim Thomas; San Francisco, Dennis Georgatos; Seattle, Clare Farnsworth; Tampa Bay, Roy Cummings; Washington, Paul Woody.



CLIFF GRASSMICK FOR TSN

A stud on the slopes, Bloom has plenty to prove if he's going to hang around in the NFL.

because he's attempting an unprecedented crossover?

"He's an interesting prospect," says Rob Rang, an analyst for NFLDraftScout.com. "But if his name wasn't Jeremy Bloom and he wasn't an Olympian, then I don't think people would be talking much about him."

related to his "other" sport.

But is Bloom a legitimate NFL prospect? Or is he gaining so much recognition solely

Bloom hopes to change that by flaunting his speed—believed to be in the 4.3 range in the 40—at the NFL Scouting Combine later this month. In his two seasons at Colorado, Bloom (5-9, 175) flashed big-play potential; he returned three kicks for touchdowns and averaged 19.1 yards per catch as a receiver.

"I don't think he'll be a high draft pick, but as a specialty player, somebody will pick him up," says former NFL quarterback Warren Moon, an analyst for FOX Sports Net. "He's kind of small, but he's got great speed, so I think somebody will give him a chance to return punts and maybe be a game-changer for them."

That's all Bloom wants: a chance to show what he can do. And it's not as if his work on the slopes is irrelevant to football. In fact, the things that make him a successful skier translate quite nicely to football.

TSN

Crossover

Brain "The most important part," as Bloom calls it. Confidence is key in football and skiing. You must believe you are the best to be the best—and Bloom is a true believer.

In skiing, they control his poles. In football, they could control his fate. "The guy catches the ball," Rang says. "He's been a consistent playmaker." Bloom continues to hone this aspect of his game by catching passes from a ball machine. He has the added benefit of the hand strength developed from all those years of gripping ski poles.

There's no denying Bloom has plenty of leg strength. In freestyle skiing, he reaches speeds of 35 mph and jumps to heights of 25 feet. His powerful legs contribute to his burst, which is generated from the hips and thighs. You can't be a big-play kick returner or receiver without burst; Bloom has it. And it emanates from his hip strength, flexibility and explosiveness. "There is definitely an overlap there between what he does on the slopes and on the football field," says Will Lewis, the Seahawks' director of pro personnel. "Whenever you watch film on him, what you see is Jeremy running away from people. It's impressive."

Hands

Lower body

Eyes Vision is one of Bloom's most indispensable qualities, whether he's returning a kick or attacking a moguls course. In football, a receiver or return man must react to colors coming at him quickly—and from all directions. The situation is heightened for a freestyle skier, who also must deal with the challenge of gauging depths.

Arms "Other than chicks dig them," Bloom says, "they also serve a purpose."

Those chick-magnet appendages and his upper-body strength will be vital in getting off the line against press coverage. In skiing, arms are more about providing balance.

Heart Bloom wants to play in the NFL. How badly? "The Olympics are great," he says, "but they're not the Super Bowl or the NFL." So much for living the Olympic dream. His long-range aspirations involve a single ring, not five interlocked ones.

Core This is the foundation for upper- and lower-body strength as well as the fulcrum for body control and balance. Anyone who doubts the parallels between skiing and running with a football hasn't watched Bloom motor through a series of huge moguls. "Physically, freestyle skiing takes a lot of balance, agility and body control—all important qualities in football," Bloom says.

10 | 20 | 30 | 40 | 40 | 30 | 20 | 10

DOUG PENSINGER / GETTY IMAGES

move

The traits that make
JEREMY BLOOM a
world-class skier could put
him on a run to the NFL
By Clare Farnsworth



INSIDER KARA YORIO

kyorio@sportingnews.com



You won't hear 'O Canada' after the gold medal game.

The net result: gold for the Czechs

Start learning the Czech national anthem. When the Olympic tournament in Torino is over, the Czech Republic players will be standing on the top platform.

Hockey predictions usually are made from the goal out. Before the start of the NHL season, Canada had a huge advantage at the position. Some say it still does—Canada general manager Wayne Gretzky is leaving home goalies who would be No. 1 netminders for other nations. It was assumed the depth Gretzky is bringing to Torino, which includes Marty Turco and Roberto Luongo, would ensure Canada's chances of winning a gold medal even if starter Martin Brodeur of the Devils suffered a catastrophic injury.

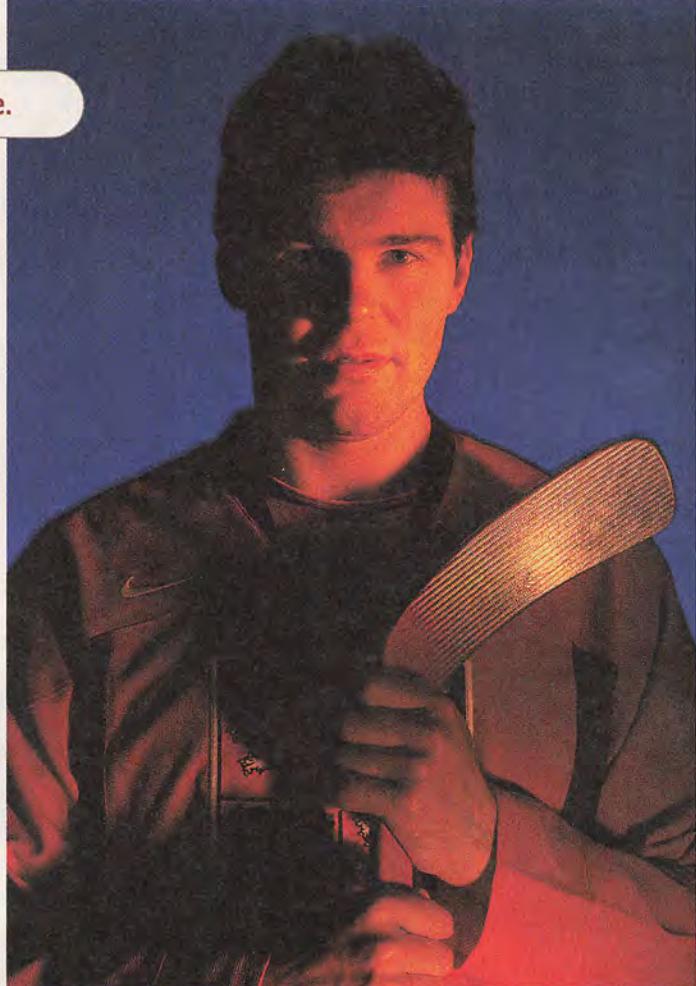
Then the season began.

Brodeur hasn't been himself after suffering a knee injury, though he did get on a roll last month. He will be highly motivated and will have a team of

All-Stars in front of him, but the rest of the world now knows he's vulnerable. The Stars' Turco and the Panthers' Luongo have been up and down as well.

So, who is dominant in goal? The answer, shockingly, is the Senators' Dominik Hasek. Smart money would have had the 41-year-old Hasek nursing a serious groin injury by now, but he's perfectly healthy. He also hasn't shown any signs of struggling. And yet, he's not a sure thing to be the Czechs' No. 1 guy. Predators goalie Tomas Vokoun, who defeated Canada for the gold medal in the world championships during the lockout last spring, might be the starter.

Beyond the goalies, there are plenty of other reasons the Czechs—not the Canadians—are the real favorites. Jaromir Jagr is motivated. He led his country to the world title, and he is leading the Rangers toward their first playoff berth in nearly a decade. He will be joined by talented



AL BELLO / GETTY IMAGES

Jagr has been on fire for months. Add in a couple of sizzling goalies and the Czech Republic is primed to blaze a trail to Olympic gold.

forwards Milan Hejduk (Avalanche), Robert Lang (Red Wings), Martin Straka (Rangers), Vaclav Prospal (Lightning) and Martin Rucinsky (Rangers). The

defense will be led by Marek Malik (Rangers), Filip Kuba (Wild) and Marek Zidlicky (Predators), among others.

The Canadians have taken

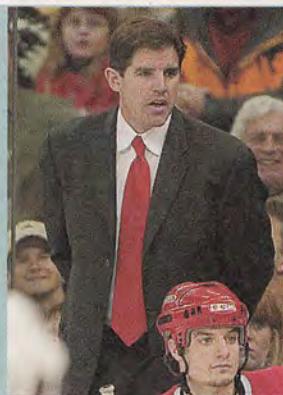
It'll be tough skating for Laviolette and the U.S.

Peter Laviolette is an NHL Coach of the Year candidate. His overachieving Hurricanes are battling the Senators for the top spot in the East—and the league. But the challenge he has met with Carolina is nothing compared with what he faces in leading the United States squad in Torino.

Laviolette is working with a roster of extremes in terms of experience as USA Hockey undergoes a transition from the old guard to a new one. Twelve players, including all three goalies—Rick DiPietro, Robert Esche and John Grahame—have no Olympic experience. Six Americans, led by 44-year-old captain Chris Chelios, have a little more experience than is desirable.

The United States' group in round-robin play includes Russia, Slovakia and Sweden. Assuming Team USA can outpoint Latvia and Kazakhstan and get to the medal round, it likely will take on the Czechs, Canadians, Finns or Swiss in the single-elimination quarterfinals.

A bronze medal would be a fine accomplishment.



BOB LEVERONE / TSN

Laviolette might win the Cup but likely won't get near the gold.

BLOG ALERT

Why not save some pages in the rulebook and just have it say that all disciplinary action will be decided subjectively based on NHL VP Colin Campbell's feeling that day?

Kara covers more than the Olympics. Skate over to sportingnews.com and see what she's up to.

some hits heading into the Olympic break. Their defense has been weakened by injuries. The Canucks' Ed Jovanovski (abdominal surgery) is out. More important, Scott Niedermayer must decide between undergoing arthroscopic surgery to repair torn cartilage in his knee so he can finish the season with the Mighty Ducks or going to the Olympics and possibly needing season-ending surgery after he returns.

Niedermayer takes his responsibility to his organization as seriously as he takes the honor of playing for his country. The Canadians could not overcome his failing to go to Torino or going and not being at the top of his game. Niedermayer was a huge reason why his team won the gold in 2002. In a tournament of All-Stars, one top player in less than top form can mean the difference between gold and silver.

If hockey fans are lucky, these two teams will meet in the gold medal game. And when it's over, Jagr and his teammates will be watching their flag rise above the others.

TSN

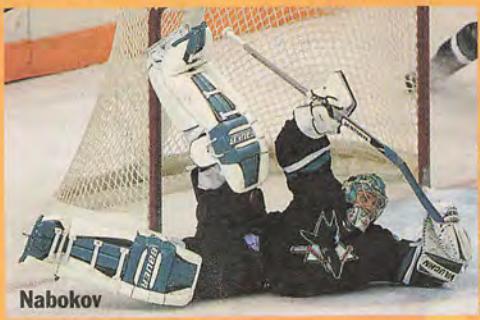
speed reads

Of the second-tier teams, Germany, with Capitals goaltender Olaf Kolzig, has the best shot at pulling off an upset in round-robin play. But Kolzig will need to be scorching hot for the Germans to beat any of the better teams.

Upset that real life will get in the way of keeping track of Olympic hockey? Go to nbcolympics.com and click E-mail/SMS Alerts. The results immediately will be at your fingertips—on your cell phone or computer.

Kolzig

Everyone, including me, is talking about the Canadians and Czechs, but look out for the Russians. The Sharks' Evgeni Nabokov can meet the challenge in goal, and the team won't lack scoring firepower.



MARCO JOSE SANCHEZ / AP

Nabokov

Surfing on ice

If you have the channels, NBC has the hockey coverage. A few must-see matchups (all times Eastern; all games live in all time zones unless noted):

February 16	Sweden vs. Russia	10 a.m.	MSNBC, Universal HD
February 19	U.S. vs. Sweden	11 a.m.	NBC
	Finland vs. Canada	3 p.m.	CNBC, Universal HD
February 20	Women's gold medal game	2:30 p.m.	NBC
February 21	Canada vs. Czech Republic	10:30 a.m.	Universal HD
	U.S. vs. Russia	2:30 p.m.	USA Network, Universal HD
February 25	Men's bronze medal game	2:30 p.m.	NBC (live only in Eastern, Central zones)
February 26	Men's gold medal game	8 a.m.	NBC (live only in Eastern, Central zones)

For Slovakia, the 2006 Olympics are a welcome change from the 2002 games, in which it had to qualify in Salt Lake City before the tournament began. The Slovaks were forced to shuttle in whatever NHL players they could before the league took its break. The team went 0-2-1 and failed to advance. "We only had a couple of guys, so it definitely will make it a different Olympics for us," Thrashers RW Marian Hossa says. "We've been looking

forward to it, and we just have to bring our best." The Slovaks qualified for the

'06 games by finishing fourth in the 2004 World Championships. ➤

Heading into past Olympics, there were few statistics to gauge a goalie's potential for success in a shootout. Not this year. Among Olympic goalies who have faced 10 or more shots in NHL shootouts, the top three entering the week were the Devils' Martin Brodeur (Canada, .870

Forsberg ought to make sure his back is OK, too—he might need to put Sweden on it this month.

OLYMPICS DISH



KEVORK DJANSEZIAN / AP

Hossa and his mates were tripped up in 2002—they'll be better off in '06.

save percentage, three goals allowed in 23 shots), the Rangers' Henrik Lundqvist (Sweden, .821 save percentage, five goals allowed in 28 shots) and the Stars' Marty Turco (Canada, .812 save percentage, three goals allowed in 16 shots).

➤ Canucks LW Markus Naslund (groin) has bowed out of the Olympics, so the Swedes need Flyers C Peter Forsberg to get healthy more than ever. He also has a groin injury. Forsberg isn't the team's only talented player—

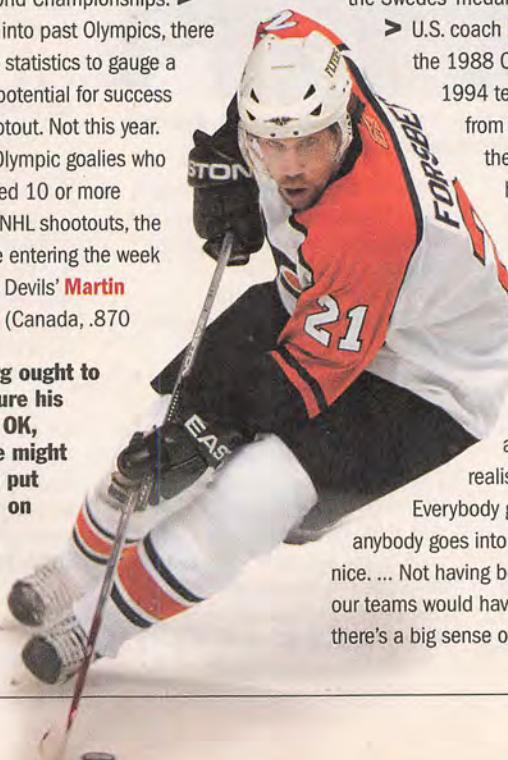
Senators RW Daniel Alfredsson and Lightning RW Fredrik Modin also will

play—but Forsberg's status could dictate the color of the Swedes' medal or whether they medal at all.

➤ U.S. coach Peter Laviolette, a member of the 1988 Olympic team and captain of the 1994 team, has one lasting sentiment from his time at the games. "I think the thing that I take from it most is how disappointed I was,"

Laviolette says. "Everybody was over there with the expectation of being the best and bringing home the gold medal. With that comes disappointment because only one team does that and there are six or seven teams that realistically have a chance."

Everybody gears up for this. I don't think anybody goes into it saying fourth place would be nice. ... Not having been able to reach the level that our teams would have liked in 1998 and 1994, there's a big sense of disappointment."



ALBERT DICKSON / AP

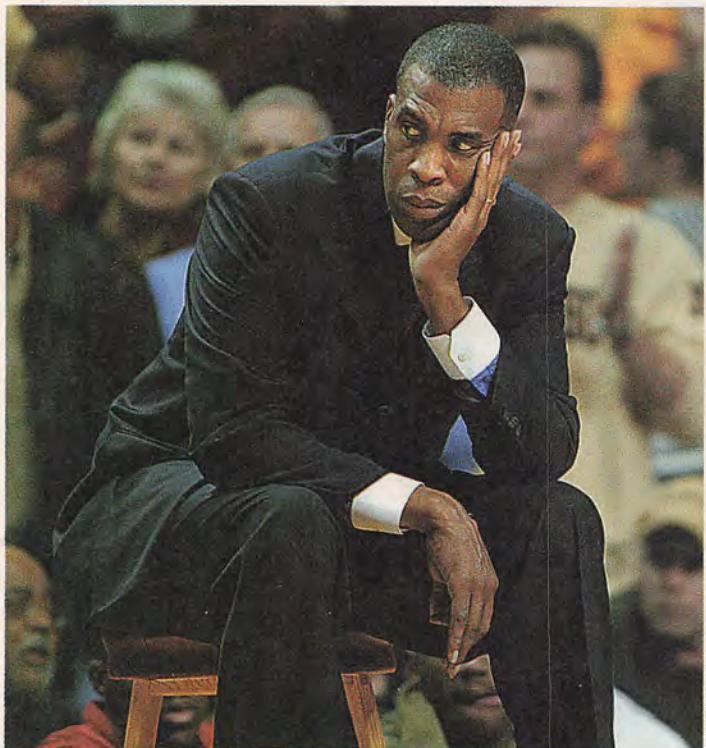
INSIDER MIKE DeCOURCY

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D-I-V-O-R-C-E—what's that spell? For Indiana and Mike Davis, it spells peace.

Breaking up is the right thing to do



ANDY KING / AP

Davis could be sitting on another team's sideline soon enough, and that should make everyone in Hoosiers country happier.

There is no ideal time for divorce, just as there isn't for open-heart surgery. This is something you do out of necessity, when there are no other options. So it is for Indiana and coach Mike Davis. It is time for them to separate.

From their shotgun wedding more than five years ago until today, their relationship hasn't always been tumultuous, but it mostly has been so. Theirs was a marriage of convenience; Davis was standing in a favorable spot when IU judged that Bob Knight had violated its zero-tolerance conduct policy. No one at Indiana has embraced Davis

since that stunning March night in 2002 when the Hoosiers upset defending national champion Duke in the Sweet 16.

The dissolution of this relationship became inevitable from the moment athletic director Rick Greenspan announced last spring, after a disappointing 15-14 season, that Davis would return for 2005-06. That declaration, which said the Hoosiers would set "ambitious and achievable" goals for this year, imploded recruiting for the 2006 class. It served as a signal that Davis, with three years left on his contract, was in a win-or-else circumstance.

Win what, though? Indiana

was 5-3 through the first half of the Big Ten season, only a game and a half from first place. It didn't matter that the Hoosiers had beaten Kentucky, Michigan, Ohio State and Illinois—when they delivered a disastrous performance in a 19-point loss at Minnesota, the familiar vitriol returned to IU basketball. It's not healthy for anyone involved:

Indiana needs a new coach it will embrace so it can get on about the business of bringing the program's equipment and facilities to the Michigan State-of-the-art standard. A program of IU's stature should not trail anyone when it comes to spending on recruiting needs and on amenities that make a program first-class.

Davis can be an effective head coach, but he needs a job in which he'll have consistent leadership above him. He has had four athletic directors, some less competent than others. He needs to go where the person in charge won't micromanage his program as a means of making the exit door appear inviting. He needs to go where his strength recruiting the South will be viewed as an asset. Davis has done an inadequate job recruiting in-state, but he covered by bringing

D.J. White from Alabama, Roderick Wilmont from Florida and Bracey Wright from Texas. He coached in the 2002 NCAA championship game. He got there with one NBA talent, Jared Jeffries. Such an accomplishment does not happen by accident.

The Hoosiers need to be in a situation in which they feel pressure to perform for their teammates and futures, not to limit criticism of their coach. In

mid-January, fans rushed the court after a victory over Illinois. Two weeks later, players were being asked about Davis' job security.

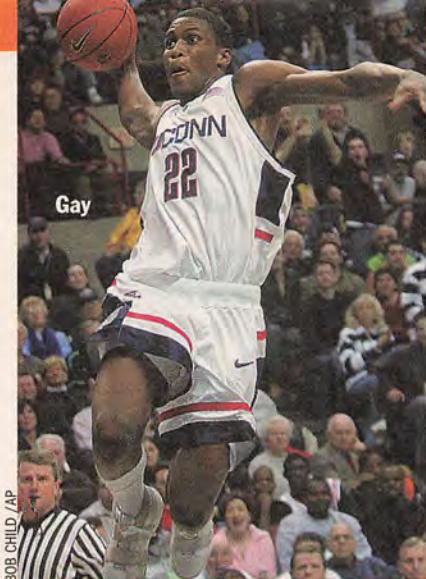
"Nobody should pat you on the back when you lose a basketball game, but nobody should criticize you if you're right there in the hunt," Davis says. "I think this team has had to go through more than anybody in history. I don't think a lot of players could play under what they have to play under."

Brad and Jen. Nick and Jessica. Davis and IU. It has been a rough time lately for high-profile relationships. They all can find happiness apart, though—or haven't you seen the lovely lady the ex-Mr. Simpson has been squiring about town?

speedreads

Yes, Shelden Williams should have been called for a foul against Tyrese Rice in the final seconds of Duke's win at Boston College. But the debate about the no-call obscured the more important point: Going for a layup in that situation, with the Eagles down three and Williams protecting the goal, was bad strategy.

With Stanford on a five-game roll through the Pac-10, Vanderbilt inherited the "biggest disappointment" title by falling to 3-5 in the SEC.



Gay

>INSIDE DISH

BIG BLOG ON CAMPUS

Views from the student section at sportingnews.com

From James Rogers, University of Missouri, *The Maneater*

Apparently, the Tigers have decided less is more when it comes to scoring and effort.

A 73-55 drubbing against Texas Tech extended Mizzou's losing streak to five, and the team appears to have surrendered to the inevitable: no

postseason this year and a new coach next season.



Instead of wins, Mizzou is collecting despondent fans.

I am waving the white flag and giving up on the team. Oh sure, the Tigers might pull a late upset or two against Colorado or Iowa State and hurt those teams' chances to reach the NCAA Tournament. But with its schedule, Missouri probably will finish (at best) 13-14.

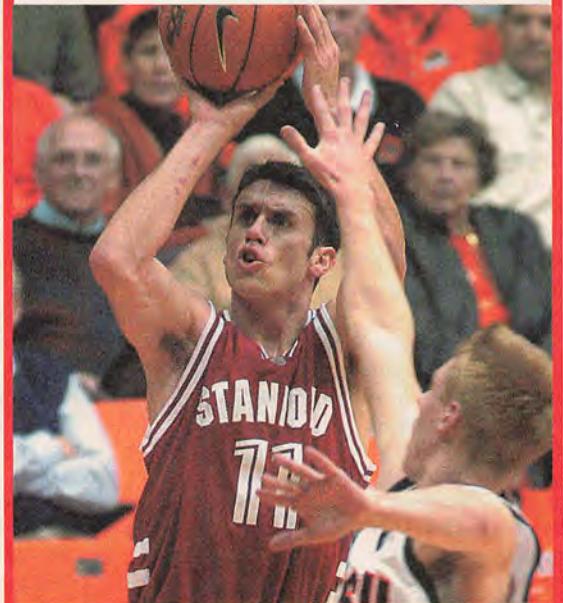
Look, my heart's already broken, and it's not even Valentine's Day yet. Cheers!

Look to see who's blogging from your school at sportingnews.com/cbasketball/campuswatch.

PLAYER OF THE WEEK

Chris Hernandez, PG, Stanford

Hernandez had to work overtime to win this week's honor. He forced an extra period against Washington by making three free throws with 0.2 seconds left in regulation and helped the Cardinal finish a comeback win. He also led Stanford to victories over Oregon and Oregon State, averaging 21.0 points and 3.0 assists and shooting 17-of-31 from the floor.



Connecticut SF **Rudy Gay** says he's understanding his game better as his sophomore year develops. In a recent four-game stretch, he shot 53.8 percent and averaged 17.8 points, up more than two per game from his season average. The Huskies are running more plays for him early in games to persuade him to adopt a scorer's mentality. PG **Marcus Williams** has worked with Gay, trying to prompt him to flare away from screens when opponents go over the top of those screens while defending him. "I think Rudy is just starting to learn how to play basketball," Williams says. "Now he's starting to use his length on defense, coming off screens strong. He's taking the shots he's supposed to take. I think maybe a month ago, he was forcing a lot of shots."

One thing George Washington does extremely well is run the break. The Colonials don't force the pace the way Michigan State does. Instead, they strike with quick transition baskets when opposing guards try to drive the ball past the defensive pressure GW applies above the free throw line. "We've got horses. Every guy we put on the floor is an athlete," says SF **Danilo Pinnock**. "We practice our fast break probably more than we run our halfcourt sets." The best thing about the GW break is its efficiency; the Colonials are more interested in making baskets than spectacular plays. "If you get a dunk or you get a layup, it's two points," Pinnock says. "The only thing is, one might make ESPN and one might not." > Since PF **Mohamed Abukar** entered the San Diego State starting lineup—he was a midyear transfer from Florida—he is shooting 53.7 percent

from the field and the Aztecs are 9-1. SDSU won't have the quality wins to make a case for an NCAA at-large berth but could get to the tourney if it continues to dominate the Mountain West in the manner Air Force did in 2003-04. > Illinois coaches have mentioned to SF **Brian Randle** that he can have a **Stacey Augmon**-type career if he continues to concentrate on improving defensively. Like Augmon, a member of UNLV's 1990 championship team, Randle (6-7, 210) is so long and athletic that opponents struggle to drive past or shoot over him. Randle has the ability to effectively guard four positions. He works against All-American PG **Dee Brown** in practice to sharpen his defensive skills, but Randle needs to buy into the idea he can be a stopper and also must avoid foul trouble. > The ineligibility of C **Greg Stiemsma** and PF **Marcus Landry** took far more than 8.8 points and 5.9 rebounds per game from the Wisconsin rotation. It forced the Badgers to make greater use of 6-10 junior F/C **Jason Chappell**, who isn't equipped to produce more while playing starter's minutes. In a 5-1 stretch that preceded the player losses, Chappell averaged 3.0 points and 3.8 rebounds in 16.7 minutes. In the team's 1-5 slump since, Chappell's minutes increased to 26.2 per game, but his scoring increased to only 3.7 points per game and his rebounding average remained the same.

> St. Peter's PG **Keydren Clark** would have to average more than 37 points over his final seven games to finish the regular season with a scoring average in the 29-point range. That's about where he'd need to be to challenge Gonzaga's **Adam Morrison** for the national scoring title. Clark is seeking to join **Pete Maravich** and **Oscar Robertson** as the only players to lead Division I in scoring three consecutive times. Even if he doesn't make it, Clark has cracked the top 15 in career scoring—and becoming the seventh player to reach 3,000 career points is not out of reach.

INSIDER DAVE D'ALESSANDRO



Jalen, Larry and Isiah—a remarriage made in hell, for the bargain price of \$34 million.

Something's rotten in the Big Apple

The juvenile obsession with stockpiling overpriced wing players has impelled the Knicks to acquire Jalen Rose, which means their stable of studs at that position now includes Quentin Richardson, Jamal Crawford, the injured Penny Hardaway and probably a few others whose names I can't recall.

But those four will make \$45 million this year—a cap unto itself, or maybe just a tattered fedora—and the only thing they have in common is team president Isiah Thomas' certainty at the time of every acquisition that each would help the ship from hitting the rocks. Wrong. Wrong. Wrong. And wrong.

This latest case is particularly interesting, if only because Thomas and Larry Brown have a long history of hating Rose. The rumors of this pursuit have circulated since October, but I always thought it was just another one of Isiah's monthly left-brain hip checks.

Turns out he just has a very short memory: In 1996-97, Rose played for Brown in Indiana and rarely got off the bench—he played 18.0 minutes per game. Then he publicly rejoiced when Larry split for Philly.

In 2000-01, Rose

lobbied the Pacers to hire Thomas, only to find himself at the receiving end of countless lectures from his new coach about punctuality and professionalism, qualities he had in unappealing measures.

In '01-02, Thomas shocked everyone by giving the point guard job to Jamaal Tinsley and the small forward spot to Al Harrington. Rose sulked, and the coach announced publicly that Jalen could shaddap: "It's not, 'I've been in the league eight years and I'm owed,'" Zeke said. "You ain't owed s—."

And in February of that season, Rose was shipped to Chicago. The final narrative came from David Falk: "This is

the way Isiah reciprocated his loyalty," the agent snorted. "He could have had Jalen eating out of his hands, but instead he injected petty, personal issues that drove a wedge between them. Look at his track record—like the CBA—and that's the way he is."

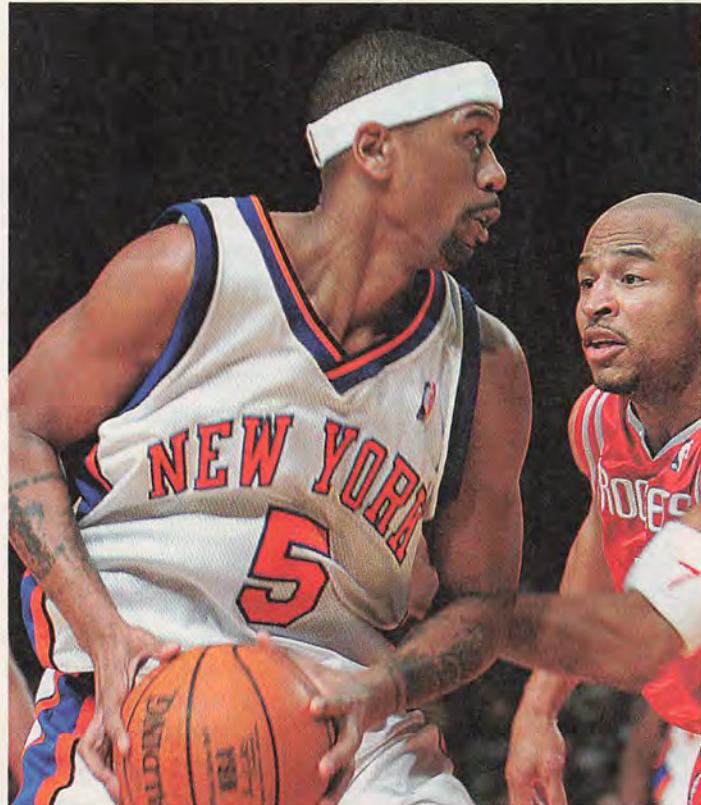
So now it's back to Jalen and Larry and Zeke, oh my—all the ingredients one needs for a high-comedy stew.

And at a price of almost \$34 million, to boot.

That's how much more the Knicks will add to their payroll next season because of this deal—\$16.9 million

speedread

No offense to the Nets and Pacers, who really got after it in victories over Detroit last week, but the Pistons already look bored. Not only are 70 wins out of the question, but 65 is a stretch because every opponent now is gearing up for them.



MARY ALTAFFER / AP

There are a few thorns on Rose: He can't defend, he's not good enough to be a go-to guy, and he has a rocky history with Knicks management.

in salary, plus luxury tax—and even Thomas admits, "I'm not saying this is a move to get to the playoffs or anything like that."

Oh. Then he must be saying it's the only way he knows how to increase a \$120 million payroll. It can't be about the draft pick he's getting because Thomas called it a "weak draft" at the time he sent the Knicks' pick to Chicago in the offseason Eddy Curry deal.

But speaking of that buck 20, doesn't your heart bleed borscht for Jim Dolan's guys? With their shallow appeals for patience and mealy-mouthed claims that they can't make chicken salad overnight, they have managed to make the Scott Layden era look like the good ol' days. They had convinced the paying public that Larry (salary, \$10 million; record, 14-32) was just the guy to get a misshapen roster to shape up, while all they've been doing is setting up a license to steal \$2,000 per night from the

schnooks in the front row.

Truth is, keeping those front seats filled is all that matters. There was a Garden game with heavy celeb attendance last month, when Adam Silver—president of NBA Entertainment and purportedly the next deputy commissioner—gushed in the *New York Daily News*, "When you have Bill O'Reilly and Jadakiss in the same building, you know it's good."

Actually, that's when you know your product has become magnet for freaks.

Of course, I could be wrong.

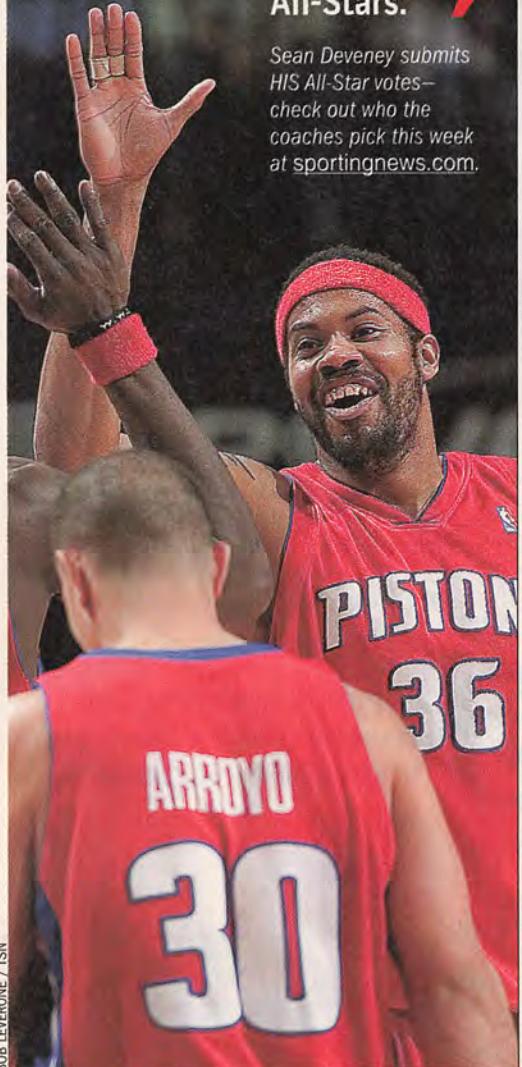
All I know is, the Knicks are a lousy defensive team that has added a lousy defender. They already have too many wings, and they've added another guy who needs shots and floor time. They already have a point guard with an overactive ego; now they've added a player who is not good enough to be a No. 1 guy but is just good enough to screw everything up when he's the co-star.

TSN

S BLOG ALERT

Rasheed Wallace is a vital cog for a great team, and too often we overlook the team aspect when we pick All-Stars.

Sean Deveney submits HIS All-Star votes—check out who the coaches pick this week at sportingnews.com.



BOB LEVERONE / TSN

INSIDE DISH

The NBA announced the Hornets will remain based in Oklahoma City next season but is "hopeful" the Hornets will return to New Orleans for 2007-08. And just to show Louisianians the league hasn't forgotten them,

David Stern is pushing to have the 2008 All-Star Game in the Big Easy. ► Taking the Charlotte injury epidemic to an absurd extreme, the Bobcats' mascot, some orange, furry thing named Rufus, broke his hand during a timeout routine. ► They're saber-rattling in Latte Town. The Sonics, who have lost \$58 million the past five years, are threatening to move across Lake Washington to Bellevue if the city of Seattle doesn't approve a taxpayer-financed \$200 million expansion of KeyArena and the team doesn't get a better lease. ► At long last, Bulls C **Tyson Chandler** is getting his act together. Entering the week, he was averaging 10.7 points and 13.9 rebounds in his past seven games. Before that, his season averages were 4.4 points and 7.2 rebounds. ► You know how we always make a big deal about a guy who leads his team in scoring, rebounding and assists? Timberwolves PF **Kevin Garnett** already has done it 10 times this season. ► Nice week for Cavaliers SF **LeBron James**. Not only did he get his seventh career triple double in a win against the Nets, he also had 44 points, 11 rebounds and seven assists in beating Phoenix. Those numbers may seem routine, but only three guys—**Hakeem Olajuwon**, **Larry Bird** and **Michael Jordan**—have gone for at least 44-11-7 since 1991-92. ► Yet another example of **Avery Johnson**'s impact on the 37-10 Mavs: When SG **Marquis Daniels** returned from a strained neck last week (he missed 11 games), he told his coach

he didn't want his starting job back because **Adrian Griffin** had done enough to keep it. "If it ain't broke, don't fix it," Daniels said. "I think we have something special right now." ► After the

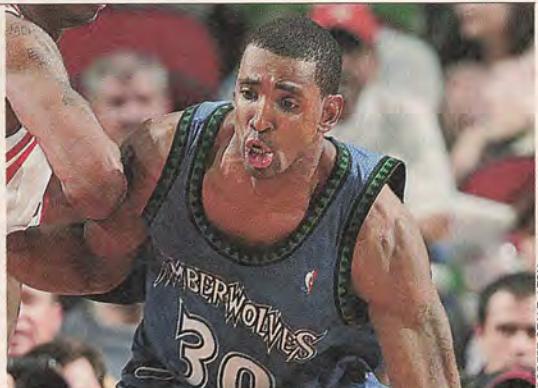
Karl Malone retirement ceremony is over on March 23, Jazz owner **Larry Miller** says he'll take "a closer look" at possibly retiring **Adrian Dantley**'s No. 4. Which, as you 40-somethings know, is about 20 years overdue. ► We're not sure what this means—it certainly means nothing to former G.M. **Rob Babcock** at this point—but since their 1-15 November, the Raptors have gone 16-16. ► Speaking of the Raps: Former Magic G.M. **John Gabriel** has had some discussions with Toronto management about the G.M. vacancy. ► Former NBA PF **Jeff Turner**, who has been the Magic's radio analyst for years, also coaches at Lake Highland Prep, a local school. One of his best players is seventh-grader **Austin Rivers**, who happens to be the son of Celtics coach **Doc Rivers**. ► Nets SF **Scott Padgett** claims Utah cheats. "They overinflate the balls," he says. "They have an offense geared toward the layup, so they want your jumpers bouncing out." Yes, he was in earnest. And before you label him a knucklehead, Pistons PG **Chauncey Billups** has made the same charge. ► Entering the week, only four guys were 20-and-10 men, and they were all out West: Garnett, Suns SF **Shawn Marion**, Spurs PF **Tim Duncan** and Clippers PF **Elton Brand**. Wizards PF **Antawn Jamison** (19.3, 10.0) was very close, but he wasn't making anyone's All-Star list. ► Warriors PF **Troy Murphy** was so sure he was getting shipped out of Golden State for SF **Ron Artest** that he didn't bother to extend the membership at his personal gym.

Recent trades were all about the money

Just as the New York-Toronto trade was all about the Raptors' dumping Jalen Rose's salary, the Boston-Minnesota deal was mostly about giving.

The Celtics wanted to liberate themselves from **Mark Blount** at any cost, and it just so happens Danny Ainge was able to close a scorer-for-scorer deal (Ricky Davis for Wally Szczerbiak) while ridding himself of a chronic nuisance.

Though the Celtics added one of the league's purest shooters, a first-round pick and a former No. 1 overall pick (legendary underachiever Michael Olowokandi) in the process, improvement won't be immediately apparent. Davis truly resurrected his career in Boston—he was the C's best defender, and his game blended fairly well with Paul Pierce's. Szczerbiak can't match Davis for energy or imagination off the dribble, but he is a likely to be a good complement to Pierce. Entering the week, the Celtics were 1-5 with Wally World orbiting their perimeter, but he'll do well with Pierce as long as he remembers he isn't the star.



ROBERT SEALE / TSN

Q&A

TSN: At this time last season, you were buried on the Cavaliers' bench and seemingly on your way out of the league. Now you're starting for one of the best teams in the NBA. What happened?

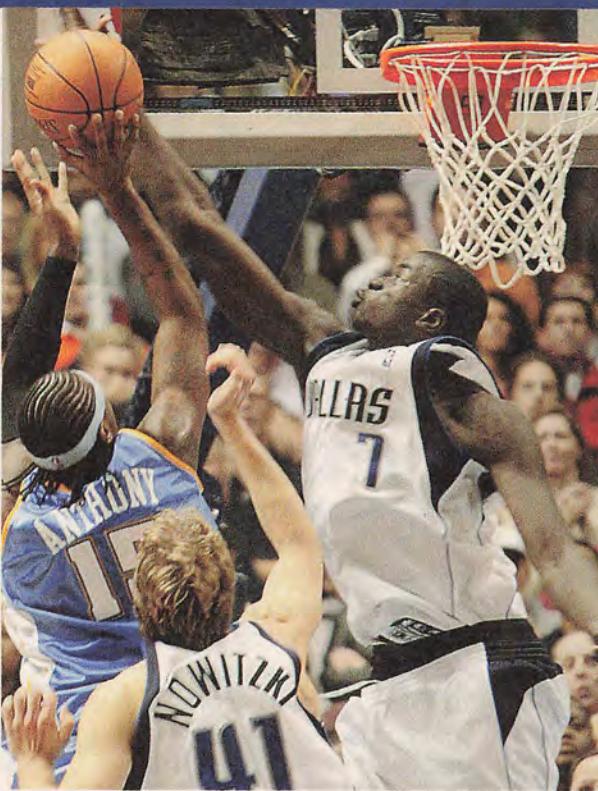
DIOP: Opportunity. I didn't get any minutes in Cleveland.

TSN: Well, it's not like the Mavericks guaranteed you playing time when you signed. Something must be different.

DIOP: In Cleveland, they want the center to do a lot, on offense and defense. Here, my role has been more limited to what I do best—rebounding and defense.

TSN: How much did attending Tim Grgurich's camp for big men in Las Vegas last summer help you?

DIOP: It helped me be seen. I had lost a lot of weight going into that (about 50 pounds). The Mavericks saw me there. It's kind of funny because Cleveland wanted me to go and they paid my way. But they were too busy going after



with Mavericks center

DESAGANA DIOP

TSN: So you changed your diet and got in better shape. What do you miss most about your old dining habits?



DIOP: Wings and cheesecake.

TSN: It's not like I stopped eating them, but now I know when. Before, it was all the time.

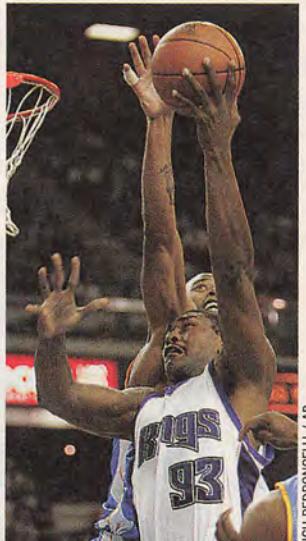
DIOP: This season, the one on Carmelo Anthony. It was a game-winner (with 2.4 seconds left, the Mavs led by one). I was kind of hiding behind Dirk Nowitzki. When Carmelo went past Dirk, I don't think he saw me coming. I came out and got it, and we won the game. I hope there's more of those.

—Stan McNeal

SCOUTS VIEWS

A Western Conference scout/assistant coach on Ron Artest's impact on the Kings

Talk about a change. Overnight, it was like they went from what was this cosmetically pleasing motion offense to an isolation game. Get the ball to Artest on the left wing and let him go. I don't think he's going to learn the Princeton offense anytime soon, either. He had a hard enough time remembering plays in Indy, and he'd been there for years. But what a monster. Against the Nuggets, he went around Kenyon Martin and scored on a layup, then he went through him and scored. When they started doubling Artest, he made nice entry passes into the post. This team is now an isolation/post-up team of Artest, Bonzi Wells and Shareef Abdur-Rahim. I think they'll be good, but where does Mike Bibby fit in? As a spot-up shooter? Are there going to be enough balls to satisfy everyone?



The Kings often scrap their motion offense when Artest is in the game.

TOP 5

Players (or ex-players) from Texas who could be heading to Houston for All-Star weekend

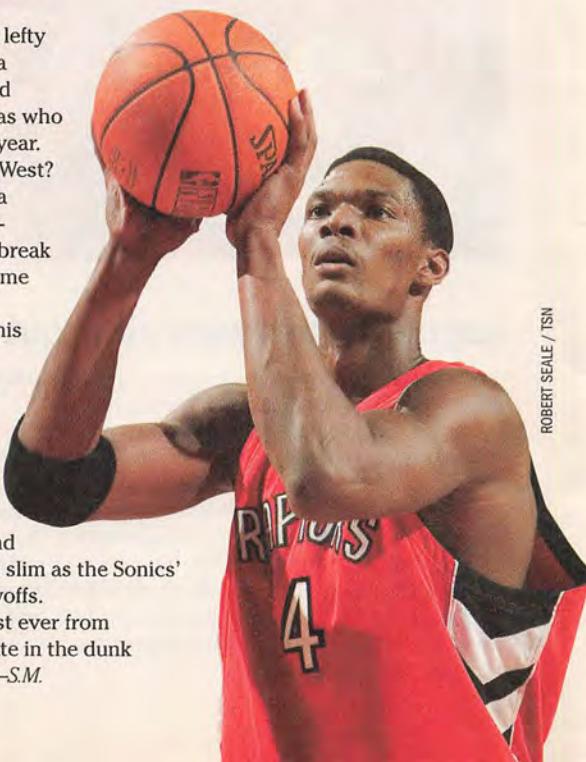
1 **Chris Bosh.** A smooth lefty who is on track to be a perennial All-Star—and likely the only one from Texas who will make the big game this year. But what if he played in the West?

2 **T.J. Ford.** Looking for a victory in the Rookies-Sophomores game to break his 0-5 skid in trips to his home state as a pro.

3 **Deron Williams.** Lost his starting job with the Jazz and likely will be a backup on the Rookies team.

4 **Rashard Lewis.** He is averaging 21.7 points, but his chances of making his second straight All-Star Game are as slim as the Sonics' chances of reaching the playoffs.

5 **Clyde Drexler.** The best ever from Houston will participate in the dunk contest—as a judge. —S.M.



ROBERT SEALE / TN

INSIDER. KEN ROSENTHAL



Even if the Angels fail to win the A.L. West this season, they are set up for the rest of the decade.

No moves are good moves

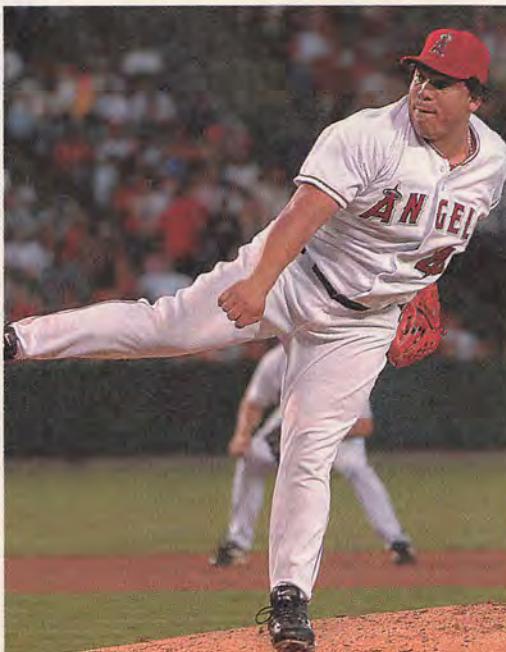
The Angels did nothing this offseason—or close to nothing. Their inactivity wouldn't play in New York, Boston or any other impatient East Coast market. Their restraint might cost them the American League West title. But it's difficult to dispute the sheer, old-fashioned logic of what general manager Bill Stoneman is trying to accomplish.

Stoneman's plan, though ill-suited for the knee-jerk age of talk radio, Internet message boards and fantasy baseball mania, reflects a time-honored baseball philosophy: Show patience. Promote from within and contend not just for one season but for a succession of seasons.

The plan will work; the Angels' farm system is perhaps the best in baseball. But Stoneman has played it too safe for 2006, making only three low-impact moves—trading for infielder Edgardo Alfonzo and lefthanded reliever J.C. Romero and signing free-agent righthander Hector Carrasco—after barely missing on free-agent first baseman Paul Konerko.

That's it for a team that finished 11th in the American League in on-base plus slugging percentage and scored only 11 runs in five games against the White Sox in the ALCS.

Stoneman still could add a hitter during spring training or perhaps make a move at the



JOHN CORDES FOR TSN

The Angels haven't improved a rotation anchored by the sore-shouldered Colon.

trading deadline, when one of his hot-hitting middle-infield prospects is ready. But for now, the lineup beyond right fielder Vladimir Guerrero looks thin; *Baseball Prospectus* forecasts the Angels' offense as the second worst in the A.L., ahead of only the Royals'.

The rotation, too, is no lock to hold together. Righthander Bartolo Colon is coming off a strained shoulder that kept him out of the ALCS. Righthander Kelvim Escobar had elbow surgery last season. The fifth starter candidates are largely unheralded, which explains why the Angels are making a late push to sign free-agent righthander Jeff Weaver, according to the *Los Angeles Times*.

Yet, even with Weaver, a step

back might be inevitable—the A's are improved, and the Rangers might be, too—but Stoneman disputes such analysis. He believes left fielder Garret Anderson and center fielder Darin Erstad will bounce back. He sees first baseman Casey Kotchman growing into a quality hitter and outfielder/DH Juan Rivera making a bigger impact. Rookie catcher Jeff Mathis will help replace departed free agent Bengie Molina, and a wave of prospects—most

notably, first baseman Kendry Morales, shortstop Brandon Wood and second baseman Howie Kendrick—is close to the majors.

Whether all that translates into a third straight division title and fourth postseason appearance in five years is an open question. Some believe Stoneman is exercising undue caution; others admire him for refusing to cave to fan and media pressure. In any case, he's doing it his way, the old-fashioned way. If his plan goes slightly awry in '06, the setback will be only temporary.

TSN

Ken Rosenthal is FOXSports.com senior baseball writer. His insider column is special to the SPORTING NEWS.

The Dodgers' future is now—and later

The Dodgers' Ned Colletti pulled off a difficult feat in his first two months as a general manager: He protected one of the game's top farm systems while fixing the major league club.

Unlike the Angels, the Dodgers couldn't simply wait for their youngsters to emerge. The Dodgers are coming off a 71-91 season, their worst since 1992 and second worst since moving to Los Angeles in 1958.

Colletti surely was tempted to unload prospects for veterans; that frequently was the Giants' approach when he was their assistant G.M. Instead, he signed free agents to short-term deals, buying time while trying to compete in the mediocre N.L. West.

In his hectic first eight weeks on the job, Colletti hired a manager and coaching staff, signed six free agents and made three trades. His only prospects-for-veterans move was his trade of pitchers Edwin Jackson and Chuck Tiffany to the Devil Rays for relievers Danys Baez and Lance Carter.

Colletti moved swiftly to sign free-agent shortstop Rafael Furcal, overpaying at \$13 million per season but restricting the term to three years. He gave two-year deals to free-agent third baseman Bill Mueller and righthander Brett Tomko. His other free-agent additions signed for one year.

The Dodgers will open the season with a payroll of about \$100 million, a figure that likely is a shock to former G.M. Paul DePodesta; some expected owner Frank McCourt to drop the payroll into the \$70 million range. But the arrivals of several top prospects will help balance future payrolls.

Like the Angels, the Dodgers figure to get stronger down the road.



NICK UT/AP

Colletti hit the ground running; he hopes the team he assembled does the same.



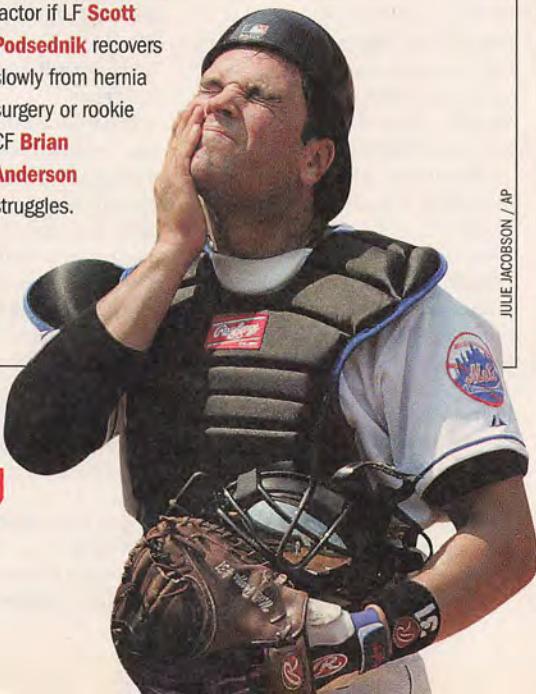
The Astros want to trade for another starting pitcher even if Clemens returns. RHP **Fernando Nieve** or RHP **Jason Hirsh** could win a spot, but the Astros also could trade a lesser young pitcher—perhaps RHP **Taylor Buchholz**—for a back-of-the-rotation veteran. Buchholz, 24, seems to have recovered from surgery on his biceps and shoulder last offseason. He threw free and easy at the Astros' minicamp. ➤ Free-agent RHP **Jeff Weaver** sucked up at least 220 innings for the Dodgers in each of the past two seasons, but his struggles against lefthanded hitters remain a concern for some clubs. Lefthanded hitters have a career .833 on-base plus slugging percentage against Weaver; righthanders are at .664. ➤ The Cubs and Rangers are the teams most interested in acquiring Red Sox IF **Tony Graffanino**, but the Cubs can't make a move for Graffanino unless they first trade 2B **Todd Walker**. The Cubs want to keep IF/OF **Jerry Hairston**, who they believe was at less than 100 percent last season coming off a broken left ankle. ➤ The Indians would like to add a corner outfielder between now and the July 31 nonwaiver deadline. RHP **Jake Westbrook** probably would have been too high a price to pay for Reds RF **Austin Kearns**. Westbrook, 28, has worked at least 210 innings in each of the past two seasons and is signed for \$10 million over the next two years. Kearns, 25, has yet to put together a full season of production. ➤ More than one rival executive says the Orioles blundered by signing RF **Jay Gibbons** to a four-year, \$21.1 million contract extension, but the Orioles point to Gibbons' improved health and .871 OPS after the All-Star break as evidence

INSIDE DISH

RHP **Roger Clemens** made quite an impression on the Astros' young pitchers at the team's recent minicamp in Houston. As Clemens threw a bullpen session, he took the pitchers through his thought process, explaining how he prepares both mentally and physically for games. He also gathered the pitchers in a circle around the mound and took questions. Clemens has told Astros officials he will not merely be a figurehead after he retires and starts his personal services contract with the club. He apparently wants to take on an active role in instruction.

he still has upside. Gibbons, 28, also was more of a fly-ball hitter last season, a good sign for a lefthanded hitter at Camden Yards. On the other hand, Gibbons' career on-base percentage is .315. ➤ The Braves could trade RHP **John Thomson** for a late-innings reliever, but it might not be prudent given

the injury concerns in their rotation. Thomson, 32, is cost-effective at \$4.75 million and possibly could fill a bullpen role if LHP **Horacio Ramirez** and RHP **Kyle Davies** prove worthy of spots in the rotation. Then again, Thomson has made only one career relief appearance. ➤ Look for the Marlins to make a renewed push for Devil Rays OF **Joey Gathright** in spring training. The Marlins love Eric Reed's defense but aren't convinced he'll hit. Thin as their outfield is, the Marlins have zero interest in free-agent OF **Juan Gonzalez**. ➤ White Sox OF **Joe Borchard** could make the club as a reserve—and look out for OF **Jerry Owens**, who led the Class AA Southern League in batting last season. Owens probably will start the season at Class AAA but could become a factor if LF **Scott Podsednik** recovers slowly from hernia surgery or rookie CF **Brian Anderson** struggles.



JULIE JACOBSON / AP

BLOG ALERT

Everyone knows Mike Piazza can't even throw out the trash.

Do you think Tom Gatto should be the one hanging around the Dumpster? Let him know at sportingnews.com.

speed reads



SEAN GALLAGHER / TSN

The Red Sox's bullpen could be outstanding if closer **Keith Foulke** makes a successful recovery from knee surgery—their setup corps would include Mike Timlin, Rudy Seanez and Julian Tavarez, with Jonathan Papelbon or Bronson Arroyo working in long relief. However, if Foulke can't close, the lack of an accomplished substitute will create the potential for disarray.

The Padres might want to think twice about starting catcher Mike Piazza against the Dodgers. According to STATS Inc., new Dodgers Rafael Furcal and Kenny Lofton each stole six bases off Piazza last season, the most of any opposing baserunners.

Here's a question for Indians fans who remain upset over the trade of outfielder Coco Crisp: If Crisp's name had been less colorful—say, John Smith—would you be as irate?

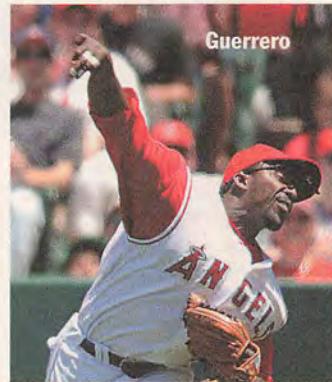
The line on Sammy Sosa, Juan Gonzalez and Rafael Palmeiro at the start of the week: 1,591 homers, zero jobs.

SPOTLIGHT: Outfield

ANGELS RF **Vladimir Guerrero** is an offensive force with a cannon arm. Steady and productive **Garret Anderson** remains in left field. **Darin Erstad** moves back to center, where he played with abandon when he won Gold Glove awards in 2000 and 2002. **ATHLETICS** The team has a potent starting trio of CF **Mark Kotsay**, RF **Milton Bradley** and LF **Nick Swisher**. Bradley figures to bring explosiveness to the lineup, but the A's trust he won't bring it to their fun, loose clubhouse. **BLUE JAYS**

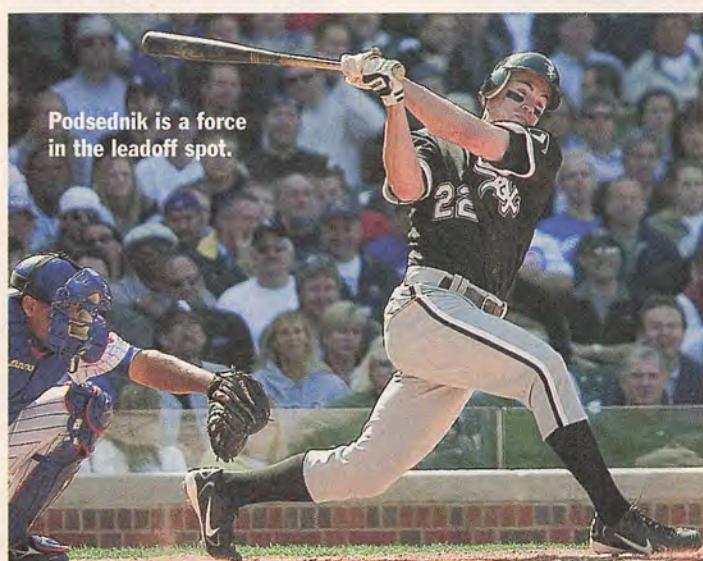
CF **Vernon Wells** is the only lock for full-time play. Against righthanders, former 3B **Eric Hinske** will start in left field and **Frank Catalanotto** will man right. LF **Reed Johnson** and RF **Alex Rios** figure to play against lefthanders. **DEVIL RAYS** The outfield has great depth with starters LF **Carl Crawford**, CF **Rocco Baldelli** and RF **Aubrey Huff**. Five-tool prospect **Delmon Young** could be playing by the end of the season. **INDIANS** **Grady Sizemore** has

will divide time. **RANGERS** Five candidates are competing for three spots. **David Dellucci** is expected to play against lefthanders and could be a DH. **Brad Wilkerson** should be a regular, either in center or one of the corners. **Kevin Mench**



JAY DROWNS / TSN

Podsednik is a force in the leadoff spot.



JAY DROWNS / TSN

center locked up, but left and right are uncertain. LF **Jason Michaels** never has been an everyday player, and RF **Casey Blake** was a liability at the plate last season. **Todd Hollandsworth** is the fourth outfielder. **MARINERS** The outfield is a strength. RF **Ichiro Suzuki** is an annual Gold Glove winner and batting title candidate. CF **Jeremy Reed** makes dazzling catches but needs to improve offensively. LF **Raul Ibanez** is a consistent, underrated presence at the plate. **ORIOLES** RF **Jay Gibbons**, the lone returning starter, likely will provide power in the middle of the lineup. CF **Corey Patterson** is expected to unseat **Luis Matos**, which would bring improvements in power and defense. In left, Matos, **Kevin Millar** and **Jeff Conine**

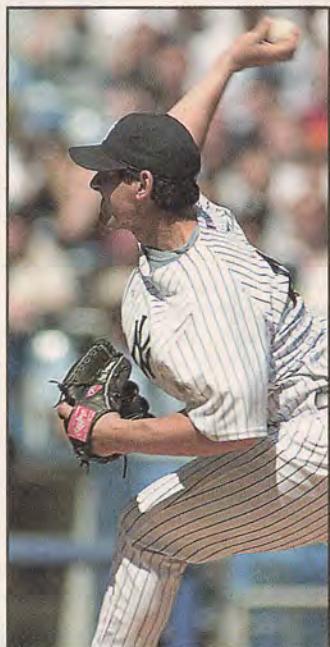
Did anyone ever tell you that you look just like ...

A's RHP **Santiago Casilla** sure looks familiar, doesn't he? Exactly like **Jairo Garcia**, in fact. They look alike because they are the same guy. Casilla, a reliever, used false documents and the Garcia moniker when he first signed. The discovery process caused him to age almost three years. He's 25.



His swing? Fine. His head? Not so much

New Mariners hitting coach **Jeff Pentland** reviewed tapes of 3B **Adrian Beltre**'s rough 2005 season and is convinced there is nothing technically wrong with his swing. Pentland says Beltre had a tough time adjusting to American League pitching and that his struggles hurt his confidence. Pentland is confident the slugger will bounce back.



JOHN DUNN FOR TSN

No sure thing

Yankees RHP **Carl Pavano** (shoulder), who missed the second half of last season, is expected to be ready this spring. But Pavano, entering the second year of a four-year, \$40 million contract, is not assured of a starting job. Three spots in the rotation are open, and Pavano will compete against RHPs **Jaret Wright**, **Aaron Small**, **Shawn Chacon** and **Chien-Ming Wang**. Pavano never found his groove last year before being sidelined.

CORRESPONDENTS: Baltimore, Spencer Fordin; Boston, Ian Browne; Chicago, Scott Merkin; Cleveland, Anthony Castroviejo; Detroit, Jim Molony; Kansas City, Dick Kaegel; Los Angeles, Mike Scarr; Minnesota, Kelly Thesier; New York, Mark Feinsand; Oakland, John Schlegel; Seattle, Doug Miller; Tampa Bay, Bill Chastain; Texas, T.R. Sullivan; Toronto, Jordan Bastian.

SPOTLIGHT:

Outfield

ASTROS Outfield depth might leave CF **Willy Taveras** without a position. **Lance Berkman** and **Preston Wilson** are guaranteed spots, likely in left and center, and **Jason Lane** probably will grab right field. Berkman will move to first base if **Jeff Bagwell** doesn't play there, which would help Taveras. **BRAVES**

Gold Glove CF **Andruw Jones** will be flanked by RF **Jeff Francoeur** and LF **Ryan Langerhans**, who also are strong defenders. Francoeur needs to judge the strike zone better.

BREWERS The club's backbone in 2005—LF **Carlos Lee**, CF **Brady Clark** and RF **Geoff Jenkins**—returns.

That's important with a young infield playing in front of it. **CARDINALS** It's uncertain whether this season's group will be better than last season's. CF **Jim Edmonds** does it all, but RF **Juan Encarnacion** is a step down from **Larry Walker**, and left field is wide-open. So **Taguchi** might have a leg up on **John Rodriguez** and **Larry Bigbie**. **CUBS** The relative lack of power hurts. LF **Matt Murton** has 25-home run potential. RF **Jacque Jones** will benefit from playing at Wrigley Field. CF **Juan Pierre**'s job is to get on base and be energetic.

DIAMONDBACKS The addition of CF **Eric Byrnes** allows **Shawn Green** to return to



Francoeur

right. Byrnes sometimes takes odd routes but compensates with his speed and all-out style. **Luis Gonzalez** will hold down left.

DODGERS

Injuries continue to have an impact. RF **J.D. Drew** is recovering from shoulder surgery. LF **Jayson Werth**, who had wrist surgery, might not be ready for the start of the season; **Jose Cruz** figures to fill in. CF **Kenny Lofton** likely won't play much

more than 100 games. **GIANTS**

This is a strength, but there are potential problems because LF **Barry Bonds** and RF **Moises Alou** are coming off injuries. CF **Randy Winn** needs to hit. Backup **Steve Finley** will play often. **MARLINS** Rookie RF **Jeremy Hermida** is the only lock. Barring a trade, center field likely will be played by **Eric Reed** or **Chris Aguilera**. Reed, the

Keep an eye on ...

2B **Dan Uggla**

reminds at least one Marlins official of former Braves

2B **Mark Lemke**

because of his hustle and grit. Uggla, a Rule 5 draft pick, is a strong candidate to start. He is considered a capable defensive player, though he lacks the range of former 2B **Luis Castillo**. He also has some power at the plate.

Scouting report

Diamondbacks

LHP **Terry Mulholland** likely will be a long reliever rather than a specialist if he makes the club. Mulholland's cut fastball has become more of a slider as his velocity has decreased, and that will allow him to be effective against righthanded hitters.



JOHN CORDES FOR TSN

fastest player in the organization, has been compared to Pierre. Aguila, **Reggie Abercrombie** and **Matt Cepicky** will compete for the job in left. **METS** The club's pitchers will lament the departure of RF **Mike Cameron**. Replacements **Xavier Nady** and **Victor Diaz** form a quasi-platoon. Nady could play more because of his defense. The club deserves better production from CF **Carlos Beltran**. LF **Cliff Floyd** was the club's first half MVP in '05. **NATIONALS** RF **Jose Guillen** is coming off shoulder surgery. Alfonso Soriano doesn't want to play left field. **Marlon Byrd**, **Ryan Church** and **Brandon Watson** are expected to compete for the job in center. Watson has the inside track; he is the organization's only true leadoff hitter. **PADRES** The outfield should be a strength. Cameron likely will produce a lot of highlights in center. RF **Brian Giles** is the team's best player. LF **Dave**

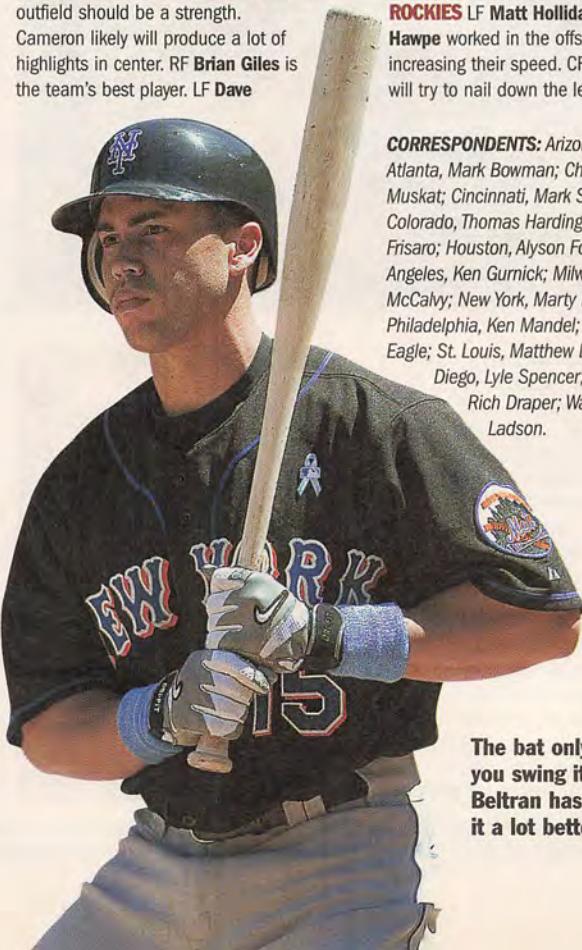
Roberts is the catalyst at the top of the order. **PHILLIES** CF **Aaron Rowand** makes the outfield defense much better. He takes tremendous routes, and he'll compensate for the limited range of LF **Pat Burrell** and RF **Bobby Abreu**.

PIRATES This is an area of strength. CF **Chris Duffy** batted .341 and played outstanding defense before hamstring injuries ended his rookie season in 2005. LF **Jason Bay** is one of the game's best all-around players. RF **Jeromy Burnitz** should add power. **REDS** With Adam Dunn at first base, LF **Wily Mo Pena** and RF **Austin Kearns** finally can play every day. Kearns has Gold Glove potential and good offensive skills. The club loves Pena's raw power. CF **Ken Griffey** (knee surgery) is expected to be 100 percent. **ROCKIES** LF **Matt Holliday** and RF **Brad Hawpe** worked in the offseason on increasing their speed. CF **Cory Sullivan** will try to nail down the leadoff spot.

CORRESPONDENTS: Arizona, Steve Gilbert; Atlanta, Mark Bowman; Chicago, Carrie Muskat; Cincinnati, Mark Sheldon; Colorado, Thomas Harding; Florida, Joe Frisaro; Houston, Alyson Footer; Los Angeles, Ken Gurnick; Milwaukee, Adam McCalvy; New York, Marty Noble; Philadelphia, Ken Mandel; Pittsburgh, Ed Eagle; St. Louis, Matthew Leach; San Diego, Lyle Spencer; San Francisco, Rich Draper; Washington, Bill Ladson.

SEE A DIFFERENT GAME

Rockies SS **Clint Barnes** played on patchy fields in the Dominican Republic this winter, so he began charging routine grounders a little more aggressively to give himself more time to throw. He wants to carry that adjustment to big-league fields.



The bat only works if you swing it, and Beltran has to swing it a lot better in '06.

JAY DROWNS / TSN (3)

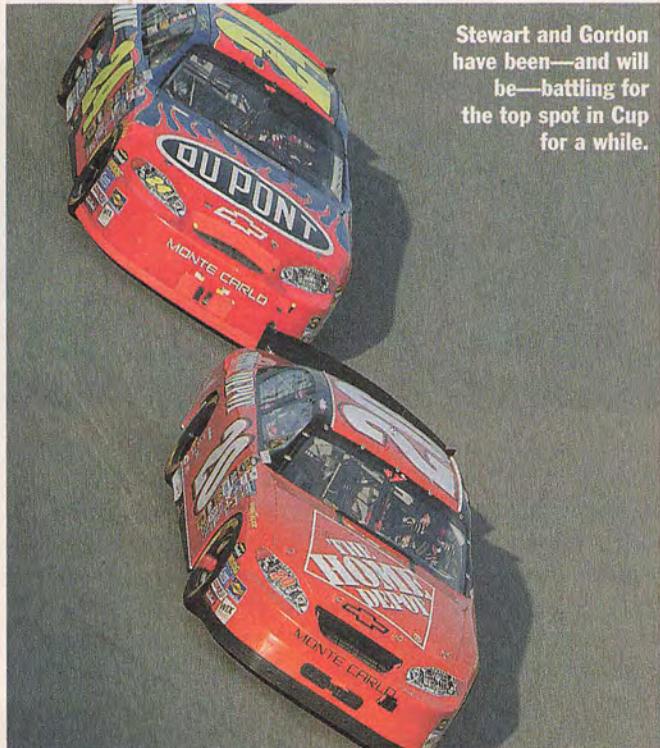
NASCAR

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INSIDER LEE SPENCER

Tony Stewart and Jeff Gordon look at racing more than a little differently.

The 20 or the 24? It's an easy call



BILL GUTWEILER FOR TSN

Who's the best driver in the garage? That question was posed last week at a NASCAR function at the Hard Rock in Las Vegas. The list eventually narrowed to Jeff Gordon and Tony Stewart. The question then became: What's the greater accomplishment, winning four Cup championships, as Gordon has, or winning the USAC Triple Crown and an IRL title in addition to two Cup titles in the past four years, as Stewart has?

Stewart's accomplishments won the day, hands down. His ability to race competitively in a

variety of vehicles on so many different surfaces puts Smoke in a class by himself. And the streak Stewart went on from July to November last season was nothing short of spectacular. If Stewart and the No. 20 team continue that momentum, there's no telling what he can accomplish.

So where does that leave Gordon, who has been the best driver for so long? Even as he struggled last season and his confidence was shaken, his demeanor off the track remained upbeat and professional.

He is the last driver to win consecutive titles, and he won three in a four-year period from



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1995 to 1998. When Gordon won his fourth Cup title in 2001, it seemed inevitable he would join the elite class of seven-time champions, alongside Richard Petty and the late Dale Earnhardt.

Gordon flirted with a fifth title in 2004, and under the old points system, it would have been a done deal. But now even Gordon believes it would take an unbelievable hot streak to win three more championships.

"I think we have a shot at one, maybe two more, and honestly, if I win two more championships I will retire after that championship," Gordon says. "Seven is not what I'm here to do."

Gordon, 34, is adamant that you will not see him behind the wheel when he's 50, and he might step out a lot sooner than that if his or his team's performance fails to live up to his expectations.

For Gordon, the key is desire, and right now he's still consumed by racing against "the best guys out there." But there are a lot more layers to Gordon than Jeff Gordon, racecar driver.

Stewart, on the other hand, will have to be dragged kicking and screaming from his racecar, much like his hero A.J. Foyt and journeyman racer Ken Schrader. Racing consumes Stewart. It's his weekend job and his recreation.

Long after Stewart leaves the bright lights of NASCAR, he'll find other places to tackle the local hotshots. Stewart will leave the show, but the show will always be a part of him.

TSN

JACOB HARRIS / AP



Terry Labonte thought Hall of Fame Racing team co-owner **Roger Staubach** was "just kidding" when he offered his Heisman Trophy as a reward

if Labonte wins the Daytona 500. "Damn, that's pretty cool," says Labonte, a two-time Cup champion who hasn't won a Daytona 500. Labonte, who is semiretired, is getting the No. 96 up to speed before **Tony Raines** jumps in. Labonte has been impressed with

crew chief **Philippe Lopez** and how well the crew pulled the program together in 90 days. > **Dale Earnhardt Jr.** has a tremendous advantage going into the April race at Texas Motor Speedway after performing a test for Goodyear at the track. NASCAR's new limits on testing

mean teams can't choose racetracks to test on, and TMS is not one of NASCAR's six test sites. Earnhardt got his first Cup victory at the track, but it hasn't been kind to him late. He says the track is "in great shape" and that additional grooves have started to open up, similar to Atlanta, which will make Texas "racier." Earnhardt appreciated the opportunity to work with Goodyear and build a relationship that he hopes will pay off in the future. > **Jimmie Johnson**

believes the Duel 150s are the most pressure-packed events during Speedweeks at Daytona. Considering all the work that goes into building the speedway cars, Johnson says the smallest

> INSIDE DISH

dent can make a difference. Last February, Johnson qualified on the front row for his Duel, then got wrecked by **Kevin Harvick**. > **Todd Bodine** will run five to eight Cup races,

with the first one as early as the February 26 event at California Speedway. Bodine tested a Germain Racing Chevrolet at Las Vegas that previously was run through Michael Waltrip Racing. Germain runs Toyotas in the Craftsman Truck Series. You can bet Bodine is getting a jump on a Toyota Cup team for 2007. > Speaking of Toyota, word out of the Rolex 24 at Daytona is that Toyota's 2007 Cup engine is in the Lexus cars running in the Grand American Road Racing Association. Could it be that Ganassi Racing, which captured the Rolex, already is winning with Toyota Cup power?



TODD WARSHAW / GETTY IMAGES

New Dodge driver **Kurt Busch** tested a 2004 Intrepid and a 2005 Charger with his new Penske Racing South crew last week at Las Vegas Motor Speedway. Busch, a former Ford driver, was trying to determine which car would be better in next month's race at the track and on other intermediate tracks. He found positives in both cars but said the '05 model lost speed faster and would impede his chances of winning. The '04 car started slower but "maintained speed better." Busch topped the charts on the final day of the three-day session, turning a lap of 169.694 mph in the '04 car.

BLOG ALERT

I'd find a reason to come to Las Vegas Motor Speedway if they raced Big Wheels around the track.

Lee Spencer is convinced NASCAR belongs in Sin City. Take a spin through her blog at sportingnews.com.



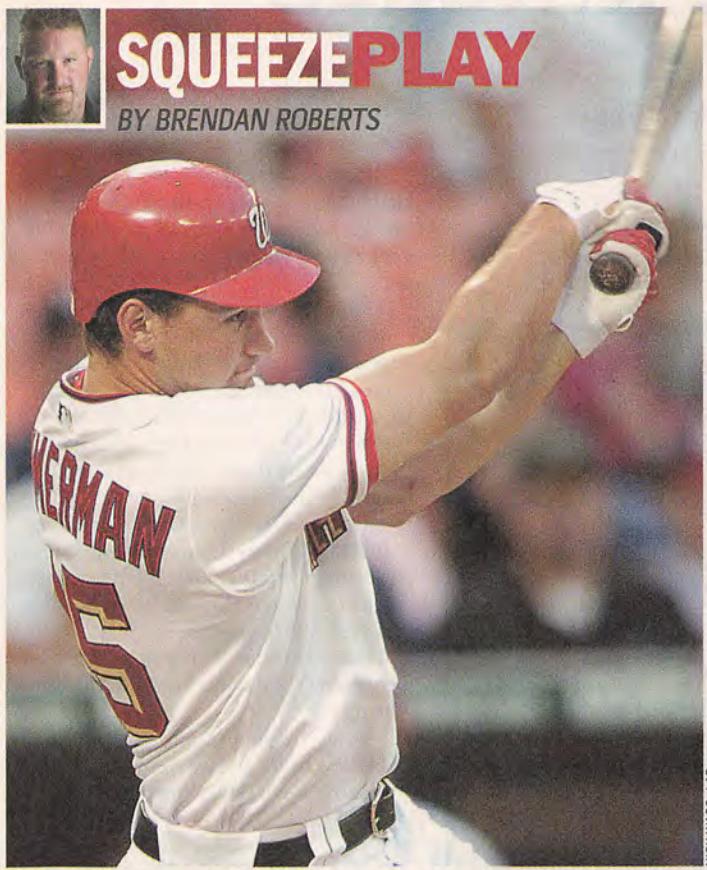
speed reads

Is the tire leasing program a cost-cutting measure or just a way for NASCAR to get Kentucky Speedway's attention? The speedway, which has served as a test track for many Cup teams, filed a \$400 million antitrust lawsuit against NASCAR last summer. After teams run out of tires, they'll be forced to stop testing, and that will cut into Kentucky's revenues.

Ken Schrader can't tell much of a difference between his old Dodge Charger and his new Ford Fusion—except for the power of the Ford engine, which thrills him to no end. Now we know what the Roush boys have been smiling about.

Competing in four races during Speedweeks is a lot even for a marathon man such as Mark Martin. So much for Martin scaling back in his final Cup season.

HAROLD HIRSH FOR SN



NICK WASS / AP

Wake up from your winter nap with a sleeper such as Zimmerman.

Sleepers

Jeremy Hermida, OF, Marlins. His first major league at-bat was a grand slam, and he hit home runs in three of his last four starts in 2005. Plus, he has the speed to steal 20 bases.

J.J. Hardy, SS, Brewers. Now a year removed from shoulder surgery, Hardy should have no concerns entering the season. He could hit .280 with 12-15 homers.

Mike Gonzalez, RP, Pirates. His arm is special; Gonzalez had 58 strikeouts in 50 innings last year. He is this year's Derrick Turnbow.



ALAN DIAZ / AP



JOHN CORDES FOR TSN

Busts

Josh Beckett, SP, Red Sox. How many times must he go on the D.L. before star-struck owners stop believing in him? Everyone should have learned a lesson by now.

Troy Glaus, 3B, Blue Jays. Glaus is like empty calories. He'll fill your home runs category, but it comes at the price of batting average. Leave him—and his knees—alone.

Ray Durham, 2B, Giants. Durham is a terrific performer when healthy, but he has more nagging leg injuries than any player in the league. —Roger Kuznia

Every fantasy baseball owner should have a war room—a place to keep grand schemes and paperwork for the upcoming season. For some, it's a folder placed neatly inside a workbag. For others, it's a stack of stat printouts on the floor in the basement. And for die-hards, it's piles of stat projections on a desk surrounded by posters of 1980s sports heroes, George Carlin quotes and Polaroids, as well as a stack of printouts on the floor and a folder inside a workbag—not that I know any of those people.

The point: There needs to be a *war room* somewhere, and now is the time for owners to spend a few minutes each week working in it. Or hours. Or days—not that I know anyone who would take that much time. But if you're taking the time, do it right:

Brush up on trannies. Keeping up with the moves general managers make in the offseason can be as taxing as watching 4-year-olds play. Now is a great time to review the changes and note a handful of guys who will benefit (or slide) from a move to a different situation, ballpark and team.

Place asterisks. Prepare to see the word *sleeper* plenty in this space in the next couple of months. Leagues can be won with the right mid- or late-round draft picks, and those are the toughest guys to tag. Put an asterisk on breakout candidates such as Rickie Weeks or Ryan Zimmerman and sleeper picks like Francisco Liriano.

Thin the herd. Cross off guys you wouldn't want on your team. The more exposure you have to their names as spring progresses, the better chance your mind will change, and that's usually not a good thing.

Review the rules. Make sure you're on the same page as the commish and look for ways to use the rules to your advantage—not that I know anyone who would do such a despicable thing.



Check your local newsstand for the Fantasy Baseball Owners Manual, or order it at sportingnews.com/books or by calling 800-825-8508.

5 IN YOUR FACE

1. **Mark Mulder** grew up in South Holland, Ill. So that's how he made the Dutch team for the World

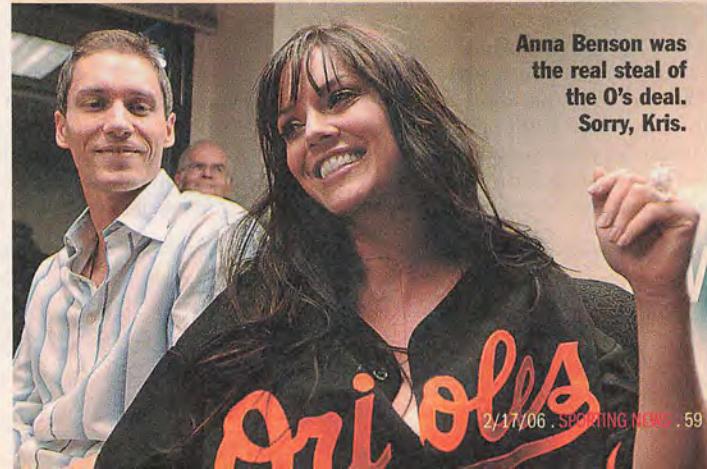
Baseball Classic! Speaking of the exhibition, Bud Selig has decided the winner gets to play host to the 2006 World Series.

2. **Boston** found a fitting replacement for Johnny Damon in center field. Now Coco can play next to Cuckoo.

3. **The Orioles** should have dealt for Kris Benson sooner. Miguel Tejada never would have requested a trade if he had known Anna would be coming to town.

4. **Mike Piazza**, 37, in Petco Park? Fantasy owners: It's time to put him down.

5. **Reliever Ugueth Urbina** is drawing interest from major league teams despite being in jail on attempted murder charges. It's no surprise. A lot of clubs are looking for help in the pen. —Rob Hupp



JENNIFER SZYMASZEK / AP

Anna Benson was the real steal of the O's deal. Sorry, Kris.



DAVE KINDRED

dkindred@sportingnews.com

From Detroit to Detroit, it was a long, sweet trip for The Bus.

One last Sunday ride

As the Steelers moved toward their locker room door to start Super Bowl 40, the most voluble linebacker Joey Porter said, "Let's bring the boys out after Jerome."

Meaning let Jerome Bettis go on stage first. His hometown, Detroit.

The last game, most likely, of a most unlikely career.

They call him The Bus because he's a wide-body who carries people along, sometimes even when they'd rather not be carried.

He's 5-11 and closer to 300 pounds than the 255 he admits. The only players who ever have run for more yards than Bettis are the NFL's sleek Porsches—Emmitt Smith, Walter Payton, Barry Sanders, Curtis Martin.

And here came The Bus dancing from the darkness of Ford Field's catacombs into the bright lights of a Super Bowl, alone, not just dancing but prancing, his feet as happy as his heart, and when he did a dancer's turn at the 30-yard line to call out his bad boys in black and gold, the place belonged to him.

The stadium, the town, the game.

All his.

In the 13th year of his professional career, Bettis was a bit player or, curiously, both less and more than that, for if his physical workload was diminished, his psychic value was not. "He's the purest professional I've ever been around," defensive end Kimo von Oelhoffen says. "That's in practice, in games, in restaurants, anywhere." Wide receiver Hines Ward: "When Jerome decided to come back this season, I wanted to do anything I could to help him achieve this."

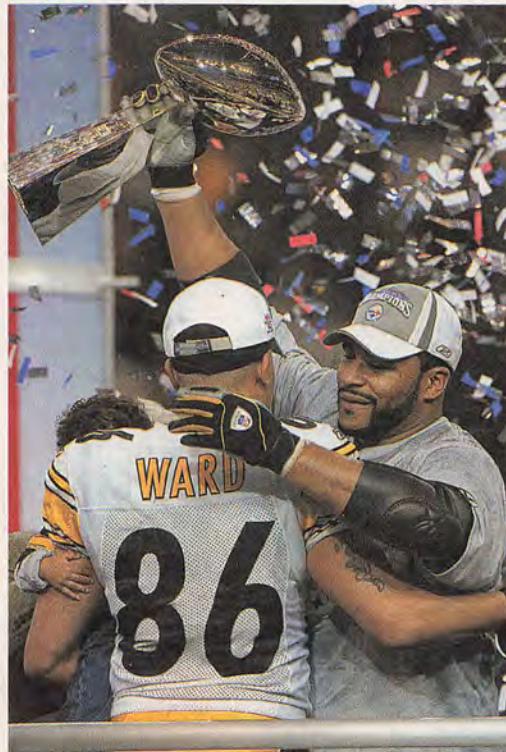
Bettis came back for one more season because the Steelers had been so close a year ago with rookie quarterback Ben Roethlisberger, who at season's end implored The Bus to return and promised to get him to the Super Bowl in the very town of his childhood, where his parents still live.

"The whole locker room was, like, 'We got 30 more minutes,'" Bettis said of the Steelers at

Know only that no runner ever gained so much ground the hard way, not around people, not past people, but through, over and on people.

Bettis, wearing a microphone for ABC television, could be heard saying in his team's huddle, "No difference from Week 1. Do what you been doing. It ain't no different from Week 1."

Regardless of whether self-hypnosis had anything to do with it, the Steelers came to a moment of truth with just 10:54 to play. They



ROB EVERETT/TSN

Teammates such as Ward wanted to ensure Bettis' grand career closed justly.

halftime of Super Bowl 40. They had played poorly and yet led, 7-3. "Thirty more minutes for a championship."

It was 14-10, Pittsburgh, fourth quarter, and

had made a defensive play, an interception, that put the Seahawks at risk of defeat should the Steelers follow that big play with one on offense.

From the Seahawks' 43-yard line, the Steelers ran a play called X Reverse Pass. Wide receiver Antwaan Randle El, lined up on the left side, took a pitch from Willie Parker and, running what appeared to be a reverse to the right side, instead threw a high pass deep toward the end zone.

The receiver, Hines Ward, remembers thinking, "Throw it, throw it now." He was that open that long. Ward worried a defender would close on him before the ball fell into his hands.

Randle El smiled on hearing Ward's concern. "I told him, 'You just run. It'll be there.'"

It was, perfectly done, a stiletto in Seattle's heart, the lead now 21-10.

And Jerome Bettis could sit down now.

The numbers of his career are huge. They don't tell you who he is. Know only that no runner ever gained so much ground the hard way—not around people, not past people, but through, over and on people. The last game of his life, he carried 14 times for 43 yards. He once went 12 yards.

The last game?

"It is an ending," he said to reporters afterward.

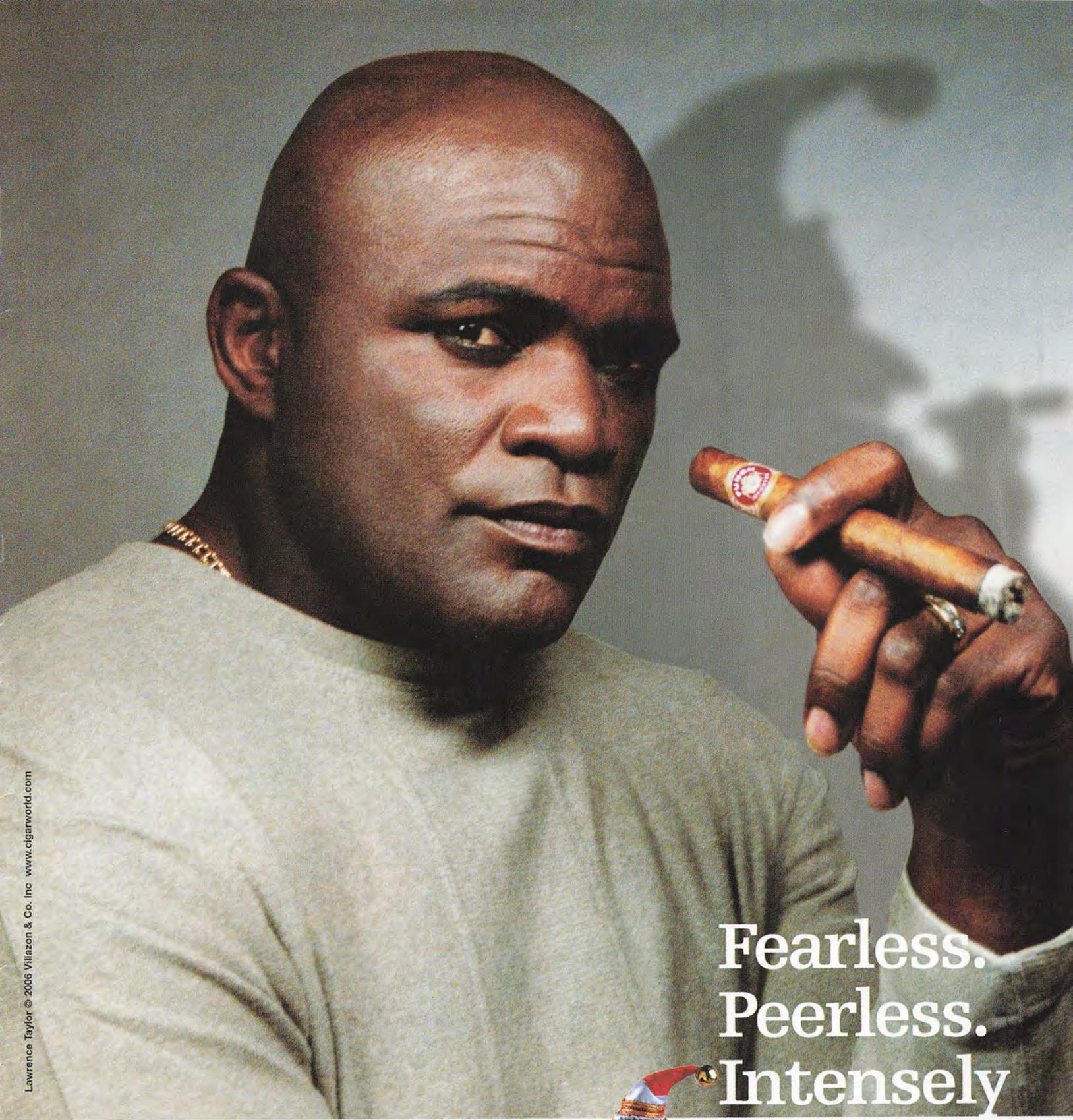
There had been talk Bettis might come back, might ask coach Bill Cowher for excused absences from training camp, from practice. He'll be 34 years old February 16. Not all that old for most folks but old for a wide-body who has been bumping traffic out of the way since his days at Detroit's Mackenzie High, then at Notre Dame, now with the Steelers.

On the night he called "a dream came true," he sat in a bright light, surrounded by microphones and cameras.

"It's been an incredible ride," he said. "I decided to come back to win a championship, and my mission is accomplished. So, with that, I have to bid farewell."

Say it ain't so, Jerome.

Jerome Bettis laughed. "It's official," he said, suddenly a poet, "like the referee's whistle." **TSN**



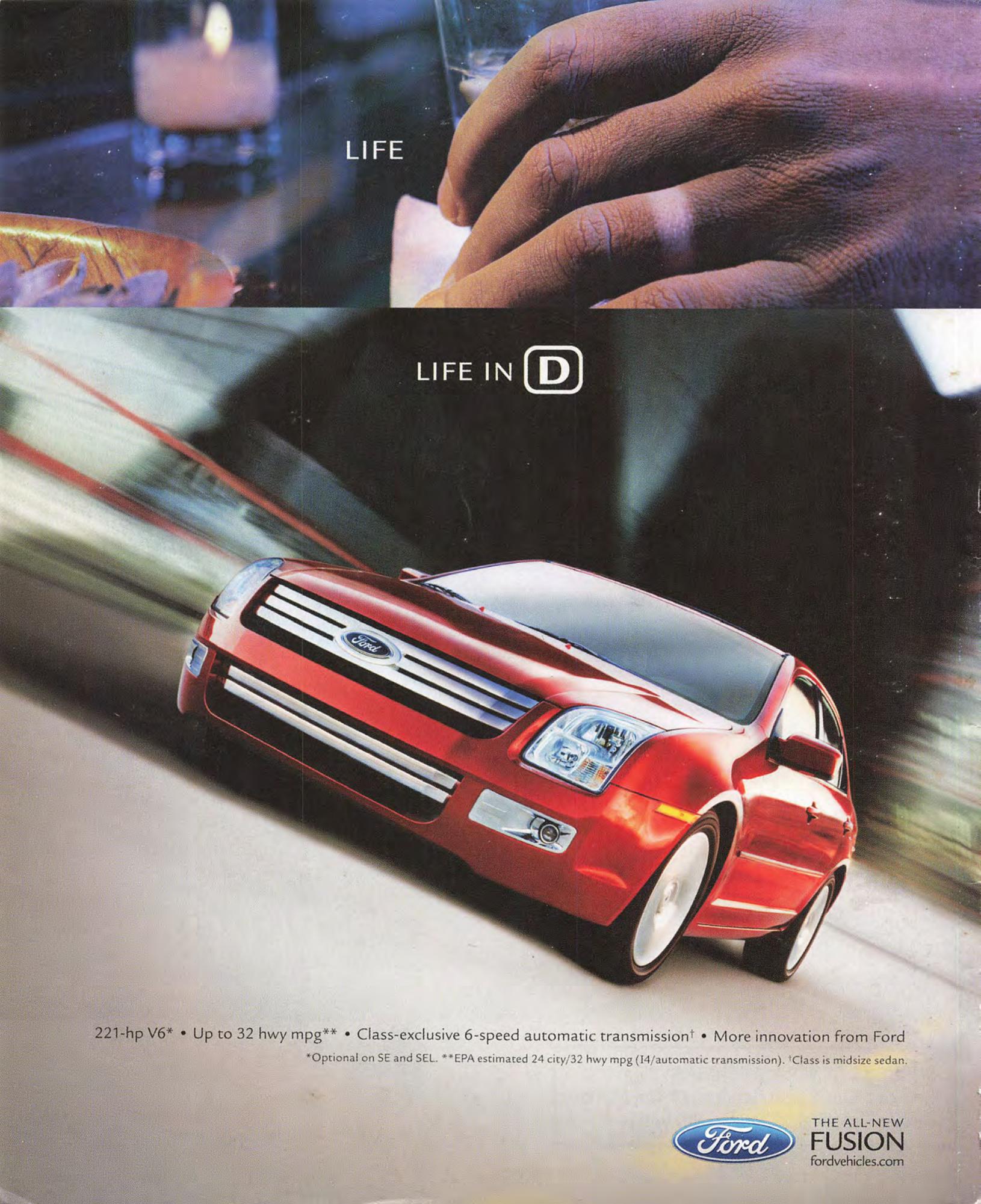
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